THE BRIGANDS OF RATTLEBORGE

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - NIGHT

The moon is a milky eye hidden behind a cataract of filthy clouds. Two men ride their horses to the edge of an escarpment. The horses are lean and their coats are pocked and abraded.

The first man is a chubby and squat fifty year-old fellow named RODNEY. He wears a yellowed kerchief around his neck and weathered blue clothing. His porcine head is topped by a wide blue hat with a drooping brim. He looks ahead, past his horse's neck, and into the dell below.

RODNEY
There's a lot of 'em.

The man astride the horse beside Rodney is a tall good-looking gentleman of thirty-seven named BILLY LEE. He has a thick blond mustache, chiseled features and eyes that look like bright greenish-blue stars; he wears a gray suit and a gray hat. He exhales; his breath mists in the air about his head, illumined by the fires below.

Billy Lee surveys the encampment that fills the dell. His greenish-blue eyes glean teepees, horses, animal skins, piles of wood, piles of bone and Native Americans setting about their evening duties or simply sitting before the roaring fires in an effort to stay warm.

RODNEY
(continuing)
What'cha thinking, Billy Lee?

BILLY LEE
Far too many thoughts for your raisin of a brain. Yet currently and most immediately, I think we've been spotted.

Billy Lee points to the nearest teepee, outside of which three Native Americans stand, their faces turned up to the escarpment upon which the horsemen are perched. The trio CHATTERS excitedly, calling out to others.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
The time is upon us.

Billy SNAPS the reins to his horse, a subtle and efficient flicker. The horse obediently takes to the steep decline beyond the lip of the plateau, and picks its footing down.

Rodney watches Billy Lee go. Rodney's eyes flicker to the Native Americans below, who are now preparing for Billy Lee's arrival. Rodney's eyes go back to Billy Lee, several yards down the path.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
Indians can smell fear.

Billy Lee does not look back as he speaks, but continues steadily downward, facing the people below.

RODNEY
I ain't yellow...I'm just cautious.

BILLY LEE
A lot of cautious men have been scalped in these parts. Move.

RODNEY
Don't suppose I got a choice, now do I, Billy Lee?
(muttering)
Son of a toothless, clapped-out cripple whore goat...

Rodney nudges his horse forward with a quick SNAP and a firm dig of his rusty spurs.

EXT. NATIVE AMERICAN VILLAGE - SAME

The horsemen ride into the dell and are met by twelve NATIVE AMERICANS. They approach the white riders. Three of them have bows and four of them have spears. They wear patchwork cloaks of animal hides and have painted their faces with green dots and swirling red lines.

Billy Lee raises his hands.

BILLY LEE
I am a friend. I want to speak to the chief.
(beat; addressing the foremost member of the tribe)
I want to speak with the chief.

The Native Americans look at him; they do not understand him.

RODNEY
Show 'em the scarf.

Billy Lee gives Rodney a baleful glance.

The Native Americans close in around the mounted duo. A young Native American Male points his spear head at Billy Lee and then at Rodney and then to the ground.

BILLY LEE
(to Rodney)
Dismount. Slowly.

Billy Lee climbs off of his horse, slowly and gracefully.

Rodney twists and spills himself out of the saddle, stirring up some dust with his awkward footing, though he manages to stay upright. He is nervous.

The reins to the two horses are snatched up by two Native Americans Females. The horses dance back, complaining with nervous WHINNIES and a few low NEIGHS.

Billy's eyes do not leave the penetrating gaze of the Native American standing immediately in front of him.

The horses settle and are then led away from Billy Lee and Rodney into the village.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
I would like to speak with the chief.

Billy Lee reaches into his jacket pocket slowly and deliberately, as if he is about to perform a magic trick for children. The Native Americans watch him, their eyes mere pinpricks of light visible within their fire-limned forms.

From his jacket pocket, Billy Lee withdraws a beige scarf, colored with red swirls and green dots.

NATIVE AMERICANS
Amagana!

Billy Lee nods and offers the scarf up to the foremost member in the group.

BILLY LEE
(pointing to his own eyes)
I have seen...
(pointing to the scarf)
...Amagana.

A Native American male wearing pants of animal hide and a headdress approaches the group. His complexion is lighter than the complexion of the others in the tribe.

HALF-CASTE
You wish to speak with the chief?

Billy Lee looks at the half-caste and nods.

BILLY LEE
We do. We have seen the men who took his daughter.

HALF-CASTE
White men?

BILLY LEE
(nodding)
White men.

The Half-caste shakes his head and then looks at Billy Lee.

He glances over at Rodney and then turns his sorrowful gaze to the ground.

HALF-CASTE
The news you bring will make the chief most unhappy...and will make my already difficult life much moreso. Hatred of the white man burns bright in this tribe, and their tolerance of me and the other half-caste is...not unlimited.
(beat; shaking his head)
Come. Share your black words with the chief.

The Half-caste speaks to the vanguard of Native Americans; they relax their weapons and disperse.

The Half-caste leads Billy Lee and Rodney into the heart of the settlement.

BILLY LEE
You are well spoken- much moreso than my foul-mouthed companion- and you are fit and strong. You could find work almost anywhere, in any of the developing cities. Why do you stay here if you are not wanted?

HALF-CASTE
I am not wanted yet what I want is another matter. I desire to follow my mother's way, not my father's.

Half-caste looks to the surrounding hills as he walks.

HALF-CASTE
(continuing)
There is no shortage of white men in this land.

They walk in silence for a double dozen paces. Members of the tribe look up from their fires at the Half-caste and the white men he escorts. Nothing is said to the pale trio, but when they pass, muttering and whispering invariably follows in their wake.

BILLY LEE
Does this tribe truly practice cannibalism?

Rodney, frightened by this inquiry, looks at Billy Lee to see if he making a jest. He is not.

HALF-CASTE
Why should the bodies of our mothers and fathers nourish the land, but not the rightful people of the land? Why should the worms feast on sacred native flesh while we go hungry?
(looking at Billy Lee)
Is it more civilized to eat the flesh of dung-eating animals and filthy beasts of burden, as white men do? Is it wiser to ingest such tainted and stupid meat?

BILLY LEE
You make a fair point, though I cannot say that I plan on changing my diet just yet.

Rodney attempts to disguise his disgust.

HALF-CASTE
I do not expect you to comprehend, but that is our way. It is part of the mystical rites of the Canhougache. Our rivals in these parts observe this practice as well. It may seem savage to you, but the Canhougache and the Maccanoi endure.

Rodney's eyes go to the top of the nearest teepee, upon which rest three human skulls and a dozen petrified hands, the fingers of which are curved like bird talons.

Rodney sucks in his pot belly in a feeble attempt to look lean.

INT. THE CHIEF'S HUT - MOMENTS LATER

Swirls of smoke hang within the hut like imprisoned clouds.

Shelves made from crudely worked wood line the walls of the dwelling. A rug depicting a ritual feast covers the entire floor. An iron pot sits in the center of the room, glowing coals pulsating dimly within it.

The CHIEF is a handsome Native American male of no more than forty-five years. His oiled black hair is tied and elaborately braided behind his head. He wears a skirt of leather and a fur vest. He is painting a picture of an old woman.

Half-caste leads Billy Lee and Rodney inside the hut. Both men remove their hats immediately upon entering. Rodney is sweating profusely from the fear that grips him.

Half-caste addresses the Chief in the tribe's unique language.

The Chief responds to Half-Caste.

Half-Caste says a few more words.

The Chief nods, glances at the two white men standing at the doorway. He motions for them to sit. They do.

The Chief continues painting.

HALF-CASTE
The Chief wishes to know if Amagana has been raped.

BILLY LEE
I cannot speak for certain on that matter, but her clothing had not been sullied or sundered.

Half-caste translates to the Chief. The Chief, not looking up from his painting, replies with a few short words.

HALF-CASTE
Can you win her her freedom?

BILLY LEE
The fellows who took her are dangerous men.

HALF-CASTE
All white men are.

BILLY LEE
I will not argue that point, though truthfully any man who is hungry, unlucky or in love can be dangerous. But these men...they are killers of a particularly nasty sort. There is only one way to deal with a posse like that.

Half-caste nods and translates Billy Lee's remarks to the Chief. The Chief looks up from the painting into Billy Lee's eyes. The Chief addresses Billy Lee in a hostile tone. He does not look away as Half-caste translates.

HALF-CASTE
The Chief says, do not be deceived by his youth. His father died at a very young age and he has ruled the Canhougache since before he had even seen his twelfth winter. He is young but he is very wise.

The Chief, still staring at Billy Lee, says a few more words.

HALF-CASTE
(continuing)
What do you want in exchange for killing these men and rescuing Amagana?

Rodney's eyes flicker to Billy Lee.

Billy Lee's shoulders relax almost imperceptibly.

Rodney scratches his bulbous second chin.

BILLY LEE
I have heard that the raindance of this tribe can summon forth a storm of tremendous power.

HALF-CASTE
We have such capabilities. In your language, the storm would be known as The Crone's Cataract.

BILLY LEE
If you summon forth this storm on a day of my determining, and send it in the direction of my choosing, I will free Amagana and kill her captors.

Half-caste translates the exchange to the Chief.

Billy Lee fingers his moustache and Rodney tries to even out the drooping rim of his blue hat.

HALF-CASTE
We will call The Crone's Cataract, after Amagana has been saved.

Billy Lee looks at the Chief and shakes his head.

BILLY LEE
No. There is a fair chance that Amagana's captors will kill me or my partner here...or at least injure us. You summon the storm first if you want us to risk our lives killing men we would otherwise have no reason to tangle with.

Half-caste translates Billy Lee's remarks. The Chief does not look pleased. He turns away from Billy Lee and continues painting, giving the elderly woman a lone protruding tooth.

He says a few terse words.

HALF-CASTE
For what purpose is this storm summoned?

BILLY LEE
The town of Rattleborge has become quite successful...too successful in the eyes of many.
(MORE)

BILLY LEE (CONT'D)
If a terrible storm struck that prosperous locale one week before their crops had been harvested, Rattleborge would be plunged into crisis and many neighboring towns would gain a significant financial advantage.

HALF-CASTE
As would you.

BILLY LEE
As would I.

Half-caste translates to the Chief. A few guttural noises are his response.

HALF-CASTE
The business of white men is of no concern to him. He agrees to summon the storm on the first day of July.

The Chief says one last thing.

Rage momentarily registers on Half-caste's face. He suppresses his anger and speaks in a cool even tone.

HALF-CASTE
(continuing)
I must accompany you to see that what you claim is true and that you hold to your word.

BILLY LEE
We have a long ride. Amagana's captors were headed northwest, into the mountains. You are welcome to come if you wish.

RODNEY
But we don't got enough-

HALF-CASTE
I will supply myself.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - DAWN

Billy Lee, Rodney and Half-caste ride across the plains, towards the rising sun. Billy Lee's black steed shuffles slowly as does Rodney's gray palfrey; Half-caste's white mare steps lightly with her bareback rider atop her.

Rodney's eyelids droop as sleep wraps her arms around him.

He begins to tilt forward in the saddle.

BILLY LEE
Rodney!

RODNEY
I'm asleep...errr awake. I'm awake.

Half-caste rides tacitly, ignoring the white men; his face a sullen mask.

Billy Lee trots his horse up directly behind Half-caste's.

BILLY LEE
do not wish to call you half-caste for the next five weeks. What is your proper name?

With the fluidity of a water serpent, Billy Lee withdraws a revolver from the holster hidden beneath his suit jacket.

HALF-CASTE
My Canhougache name is-

BLAM.

Half-caste's face explodes forward in a flurry of blood, bone and brain bits, as if he were screaming in crimson.

Billy Lee holsters his pistol with another serpentine gesture.

Half-caste slumps forward onto his white horse, his blood painting gory swatches across the steed's white hide.

Grimacing at the macabre sight, Rodney looks over at Billy Lee.

RODNEY
I was kind of curious what his name was though. Weren't you?

BILLY LEE
No. What that cannibal calls himself or thinks is of less consequence than a nigger's shit.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - NOON

Billy Lee and Rodney ride in silence. Rodney holds the lasso fastened around the white mare's neck; the third horse goes agreeably. The brains and blood of the dead Native American have agglutinated beneath the hot sun: his broken face adheres to the mare's back upon which he still sits, slumped forward.

The horses walk between the cacti that erratically sprout from the sere topography.

Rodney points in the distance.

RODNEY
I see Jordan.
(squinting)
It looks like he's still raping that Amagana gal.

Billy Lee says nothing.

The horses walk forward, between the prickly limbs of the brown- and green-speckled cacti.

RODNEY
(continuing)
D'you suppose he's been rapin' her continually since we left him?

BILLY LEE
I believe you mean continuously.

RODNEY
That's what I said.

BILLY LEE
No. You said continually, which would mean repeatedly, or in repeated succession but with breaks in between. Yet what I believe you wanted to know was if he had been raping that savage without stopping since noon yesterday- whether Jordan has been having his way with her continuously for twenty-four hours.

RODNEY
(nodding)
Yeah, Billy Lee. That's what I wanted to know.

BILLY LEE
I doubt that that is physically possible.

RODNEY
(disappointed)
Yer probably right.

The horses continue forward.

Rodney squints and shades his eyes.

RODNEY
(continuing)
Why'd he tie her up to a cactus?

Billy Lee lowers his hat's brim in an effort to see through the refracted light.

BILLY LEE
She probably stopped screaming at some point. I am sure that being bound face-first to a cactus makes her far more demonstrative.

RODNEY
Jordan likes it when they scream and curse his name while he's having at 'em.

Billy Lee nods.

The sound of distant SCREAMING become faintly audible.

The horses continue forward.

The distant sound of horrible SCREAMS waft across the cruel open air.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

EXT. TWENTY PACES OUT OF TOWN - NOON

A freshly painted wooden sign swings from bright steel chainlinks. Written upon the sign: "You are now entering Rattleborge, Population 1647. 'Western Land with Southern Hospitality'"

Behind the sign sits the town: new wood shaped into new

buildings, intersected by roads for carriages.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - SAME

MEN and WOMEN of variegated economic stature (as evidenced by their dress) walk up the central avenue, surveying the numerous cheerful storefronts- creameries, barbershops, funeral homes, chandleries, cobblers, saloons- and conversing.

WALTER, a short man of thirty-seven with his blond hair neatly combed (parted in the middle) and wearing a freshly brushed striped suit, walks towards Sindy's Saloon. He holds a box in his hands. His tie has apparently been tied too tightly.

He clears his throat and swallows dryly.

INT. SINDY'S SALOON - SAME

Walter walks into the unlit establishment, sunlight following him through the swinging doors. The ceiling is high, and from it hang three electric candelabra, currently dark. The swinging of the entrance doors causes light to flash on and off throughout the saloon.

Twenty tables, several mismatched rugs, an upright piano and a long mahogany bar furnish the saloon.

Walter looks around for a moment.

From the shadows, comes a deep womanly voice.

HUSKY FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
We're closed.

WALTER
It is I.

HUSKY FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Come back later.

WALTER
It is Walter.

Stepping from the shadows behind the bar, a bottle in either hand is SINDY, a buxom woman of forty-four with a beauty mark just above her full lips. Her curly black hair is streaked with silver and tied up in a knot behind her head, away from her square, handsome face.

SINDY
I know who it is. Nobody else in this entire town says, 'It is I.'

WALTER
Well actually, it is grammatically incorrect to say, 'It is me' because-

SINDY
Go to England or London or New York if you want to talk about words all day. What do you want?

Walter opens his mouth to respond.

SINDY
(continuing)
I hope whatever's in that box ain't for me.

Walter looks at the box in his hands as if it has magically appeared there.

WALTER
Ummmm.

Walter starts to get nervous.

Sindy places the two whisky bottles on the bar and walks towards Walter.

SINDY
Listen Walter...you are a nice fella, and it's nice that you want to give me things...but-

WALTER
Don't you want them? Don't you use the dictionary I gave you? Don't you like me at least a little bit?

Sindy reaches Walter. She is five inches taller than he is.

Walter looks up at her.

Sindy looks down at him.

SINDY
We are not compatible.

WALTER
Do you want to be a widow forever?

SINDY
The first time you came in here, you told me that my name was spelled incorrectly.

WALTER
But it's not too late to change that!

Sindy look irritated.

WALTER
(continuing)
That is why I purchased those books for you...to help you learn-

SINDY
Get out of here you irritating little man.

Walter's eyes narrow. He throws the package onto the floor.

WALTER
Spell your name however you like. You shan't see me anymore!

Walter turns away from Sindy and leaves the saloon without looking back.

Sindy looks at the the box on the floor, which had opened upon impact and spilled its contents.

Partially obscured by lavender tissue paper, lies a doll in a silver dress. The doll has black curly hair and a beauty mark above its full lips. It stares up from the floor.

Sindy picks the doll up and examines it.

It is beautifully crafted and strikingly resembles Sindy.

The eyes stare back at her, seemingly sentient. The fingers are beautifully articulated curves and each nail is painted the exact same shade of violet as Sindy's present nail polish.

Unexpected LAUGHTER bubbles up within her chest; she tosses the doll into the spittoon at the end of the bar.

It CLANGS loudly within.

Sindy retreats into the shadows.

INT. ERMINE'S BARBERSHOP - DAY

Four reclining barber chairs, each with bronze trim securing the upholstery, line the far wall of the shop. A giant mirror and two wash basins line another wall, opposite a rack with several periodicals.

ERMINE, a seventy year-old barber who looks and moves like a praying mantis, lathers up a heavyset CUSTOMER stretched out before him.

CUSTOMER
That lather smells so good, I almost want to eat it.

Ermine smiles, dips the brush into the lather bowl, swirls it around, extricates a puff of foam and coats the customer's face.

CUSTOMER
(continuing)
It smells like cakes- birthday cakes.

Ermine nods his head. He rests the lather brush in the bowl and pulls out a straight razor.

CUSTOMER
(continuing)
D'you hear about Binfrey's daughter?

Ermine vigorously pulls his straight razor across the sharpening strap hanging beside the lather basin. He shakes his head.

ERMINE
Nope.

CUSTOMER
An aunt o' hers- a fancy woman in the east- passed on and left her a lot of money and a phornagrap.

Ermine approaches the man, the razor glinting in the streaming sunlight.

ERMINE
A phonograph did you say? Hmmm. How much money do you suppose?

CUSTOMER
A sizable sum. Quite substantial.

Ermine gently pulls stubble and suds away from the customer's face, exposing smooth pink swaths of skin.

CUSTOMER
(continuing)
Smells like a birthday party.

EXT. TWENTY PACES OUT OF TOWN - AFTERNOON

A forty-two year-old MAN with a gun on either hip walks towards the swinging town sign. The man's clothing is black and covered with dust, as is his thick suitcase; he wears his black and gray hair long and untied; his short beard is closely shaved.

His brown eyes are dark almost to the point of looking like burnished coals. He has more than half a dozen deep, circular scars on his cheeks, ugly red craters burrowed into his sun-bronzed skin around his hawkish nose. His hat is a wide brim with a dangling leather chin strap. His name is ABRAHAM.

Abraham walks directly to the swinging sign and runs his finger along the bevelled word, Rattleborge.

He looks up at the town.

Abraham walks forward.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

Abraham walks amongst the people of Rattleborge, conspicuously dark and dirty amidst their fresh, bright colors and faces. His heavy boots sound noisily on the sidewalk planks beneath him.

INT. HOTEL RUDDINGTON - MOMENTS LATER

Abraham enters the lobby of the hotel- the motion of the door stirs a tiny bell to life. RING. RING. RING.

Abraham looks up at the two electric ceiling fans spinning above him. He looks around the room, furnished with two green sofas, a periodical rack and a check-in counter, behind which sits MABELLE, a chubby young blond-haired woman of nineteen. She looks up from the leatherbound novel that she clutches like an infant in her plump hands.

ABRAHAM
I would like to rent a room.

Mabelle regards his dirty apparel and thick accent with suspicion. She then sees the guns on his hips.

MABELLE
Strangers aren't allowed to carry guns in Rattleborge.

ABRAHAM
I'm sorry. I was not aware of this policy. Where do I go to turn in my pistols?

The door opens, followed by the bell's insistent RINGING.

A fifty-six year old man enters the room. He is wearing brown slacks and a brown vest over a blue shirt. He is tall, stocky and strong and has bright blue eyes lodged within his sun-wrinkled face. What remains of his receded sandy hair is combed straight back. His name is PICKMAN; he wears a sheriff's badge on his vest.

PICKMAN
I'll take those pistols.

Abraham reaches for his pistols.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I said, I'll take 'em. Hold your hands out and away from your sides.

Abraham complies and slowly extends his arms out, away from his guns.

Pickman approaches Abraham.

Pickman reaches over and withdraws the pistols from Abraham's holsters.

Pickman looks at Abraham's thick black suitcase.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
You got any guns in there?

ABRAHAM
I do not.

PICKMAN
If you lie to me, I'll throw you in jail and fine you every cent you've got. I'll only ask you one more time- you got any guns in there?

Pickman taps the suitcase with the tip of his toe.

ABRAHAM
I do not.

Pickman nods and grins, though the smile does not reach his deepset eyes. He shoves Pickman's two pistols beneath his own belt, next to the two silver-plated revolvers he regularly carries.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
You might need a bigger belt, Sheriff.

Pickman admits a brief, but genuine CHUCKLE.

PICKMAN
You can have these back whenever you leave, Mister...

ABRAHAM
Weiss. Abraham Weiss.

PICKMAN
Enjoy your stay in Rattleborge, Mr. Weiss.

The Sheriff turns and leaves.

Abraham turns back to face Mabelle at the counter.

ABRAHAM
I would like to rent a room. Preferably one with no windows.

Mabelle looks quizzically at Abraham.

MABELLE
All of our rooms have windows, Mr. Weiss...hough there's one on the third floor with only one window on the south wall and it never gets direct sunlight. There's a curtain you can draw if you choose too.

ABRAHAM
(nodding)
Thank you. That room will suffice.

Mabelle smiles, though it is clear that she finds Abraham a bit unnerving.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - TWILIGHT

The street is painted with golden twilight sun. The long shadows of the strolling residents and rolling carriages streak across the dusty road.

Sheriff Pickman, now wearing a brown hat to match his vest and pants, walks along the street, his sharp eyes surveying the people he protects.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Sheriff!

Pickman turns in the direction of the caller.

A young couple seated in a horse drawn carriage rolls up the avenue. GRANT waves amicably at Pickman and the woman beside him, DONNA, smiles pleasantly. They are both dressed in immaculate clothing and have the bright teeth and shoes to match.

PICKMAN
Good evening Mr. And Mrs. Grant Tylor the Second. Off to the church dance I'm guessin'?

GRANT
(effervescing)
We are indeed. Reverend Hodgeson's got a swell colored fella who can sing and play piano better than anyone I ever heard, white or otherwise. He makes you just want to dance until you pass out from so much sweating and screaming and spinning and stomping.

Pickman smirks at Grant's enthusiasm.

PICKMAN
Well, don't trample Donna's sweet feet with that fancy footwork of yours.
(looking at Donna)
Count your toes when the evening's through. That's an order from the Sheriff.

DONNA
I will.

PICKMAN
If you have any less than ten, send for me or Deputy Cooperson.

DONNA
I will.

PICKMAN
Good night now.

GRANT
Good night Sheriff. May the Lord watch over you as you watch over us.

PICKMAN
Let's hope he does that.

Pickman grins, tilts his hat to the young couple and walks along the central street of his town.

Pickman looks to his left. The lights go on inside of Sindy's Saloon. The buxom proprietor is talking to her employees; she does not look pleased.

Pickman walks a few more paces, taking in the late day activities. Five storefronts down, the praying mantis-like barber Ermine is closing his barbershop.

The Sheriff stops for a moment. He withdraws a cigarette from his vest and puts it into his mouth. He strikes a match on the heel of his boot and lights his cigarette. He shakes the match and drops the extinguished tinder into the pocket of his light blue shirt.

Cigarette tip aglow, Pickman turns around and looks at the far end of the avenue, from which he came. In the distance he sees Hotel Ruddington. He stares at the hotel for a long, slow cigarette drag.

As he exhales, his eyes turn to the two extra pistols lodged in his belt- Abraham Weiss' pistols.

Pickman looks up from the stranger's guns and surveys the nearby storefronts.

He sees: a creamery, another saloon, a funeral home, a pet shop, and a jewelry store.

An elderly man with a tomato-red complexion and wiry, oversized hands stands outside of the jewelry store, locking the front door. Pickman extinguishes his cigarette on the heel of his boot, drops it in his shirt pocket beside the used match, and jogs over to the establishment, named McDonelly's Fine Jewels and Things.

PICKMAN
(continuing; calling ahead)
Mister McDonelly. Just a moment.

Pickman jogs up to the decking in front of the store.

HUBERT MCDONELLY looks up in alarm, but relaxes when he recognizes Pickman.

HUBERT
I'm glad it's you Sheriff. As a jeweler, I've not had too many good experiences that began with someone running at me and hollering.

PICKMAN
(winded)
apologize...Mr. McDonelly-

HUBERT
Hubert, please.

PICKMAN
I apologize Hubert. I just wanted to get your opinion on something before you left for home.

Hubert's shoulders slump; he looks disappointed.

HUBERT
Today was a slow day...I was hoping you wanted to buy something for the little lady.

PICKMAN
Things are a bit tight right now, but whenever the Mayor pays out that bonus he owes me, I promise I'll come here right away.

Hubert shrugs, accepting but not pleased with this compromise.

He licks a brass key and then inserts it into the top lock and undoes the latch. He then licks an iron key and inserts it into the keyhole above the doorknob and twists it.

HUBERT
They don't slide in correctly unless you lubricate them.

With a huge, knob-knuckled hand, he gestures for the Sheriff to enter McDonelly's Fine Jewels and Things.

INT. MCDONELLY'S FINE JEWELS AND THINGS - SAME

A glass counter filled with jewelry and less valuable knickknacks lines three of the four walls of the establishment, leaving only a narrow space behind it for Hubert to maneuver. Another locked door leads to the inventory room.

Some golden twilight sneaks past the windows, though the space is predominantly dark.

HUBERT
As a rule, I don't turn the electric lights on after closing time.

PICKMAN
I'd not ask it of you.

Hubert nods in affirmation.

HUBERT
How can I be of service to Rattleborge's finest?

PICKMAN
stranger come into town today- a queer looking fellow- swarthy, covered with scars and dressed up all in black. His accent definitely marked him for European, but shoot me in the foot if I can tell which country he comes from, though not England- I heard plenty of Englishmen in my time.

HUBERT
I don't like Englishmen. Not one bit. They walk around thinking they're so smart and proper. When my father died with the fever, his doctor was English.
That fancy accent didn't help my father none. Whenever I hear a man speak that way- in that effeminate, nigh unintelligible
(MORE)

HUBERT (CONT'D)
style- I always thing of that damn English doctor saying,
(in an English accent)
"There is nothing I can do for him."

PICKMAN
I'm not fond of the English myself. But, as I said, the stranger isn't English or French, cause I heard some Frenchmen in my time too.

HUBERT
A French woman-- now that's a thing to hear. That damn accent is so adorable it tickles your eardrums like pink feathers.

(Hubert smiles upon reflection)
So where is this fella from, you s'pose?

PICKMAN
Perhaps Sweden or Germany, or some other way off place. I was hoping you could help figure out a little bit about him. As with any stranger who walks into town, I confiscated his pistols.

HUBERT
(nodding approbation)
That's showin' him who carries the stick in these parts. You want me to examine his guns?

Pickman nods.

PICKMAN
I do.

The Sheriff withdraws one of the pistols from his belt and lays it upon a portion of the counter illuminated by the orange twilight.

Hubert walks behind the counter and from a hidden shelf picks up a lorgnette.

Pickman looks at the gilded, long-handled opera glasses with mild amusement.

HUBERT
My jeweler's eyepiece broke. I ordered a new one from the east, but in the meantime I'm using the wife's opera glasses.

PICKMAN
You're a resourceful fellow.

Hubert raises the lorgnette to his eyes and looks at the pistol resting upon the counter. He squints.

Hubert takes a couple of steps away from the pistol, still looking through the lorgnette.

HUBERT
Problem is, you can't stand too close to what you're looking at.

Hubert takes a third step away from the pistol, still peering through the lorgnette.

HUBERT
(continuing)
Steisselbach.

PICKMAN
Pardon me?

HUBERT
Steisselbach. Engraved beneath the barrel it says Steisselbach.
(looking at Pickman)
Was that the fella's name?

PICKMAN
That's not the name he proffered. He called himself Abraham Weiss.

Hubert's eyes return to the lorgnette, oddly magnified by the bulbous glass at the far end.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
You think he lied to me about his name or do you suppose that Steisselbach is the make of the pistol?

HUBERT
I think it's the make of the pistol...or possibly the name of the town the pistol was made in.

Hubert rests the lorgnette upon the glass counter.

HUBERT
(continuing)
Mind if I handle the weapon, Sheriff?

PICKMAN
Go ahead, but be careful- it's loaded.

Hubert walks over to the gun and lifts it. He SNAPS the front suspension lever down and the barrel swivels out into a loading position in one quick, automated motion.

HUBERT
Fancy.

Hubert plucks a bullet from a chamber and places the gun down upon the counter.

Hubert raises the bullet to his eye, squinting.

HUBERT
(continuing)
Hmmm.

Hubert rests the bullet in the patch of sunlight and again lifts the lorgnette to his face.

HUBERT
(continuing)
Hmmmmmm.

Hubert take one mincing step backward, staring at the bullet through the lorgnette.

HUBERT
(continuing)
Well!

Pickman patiently awaits Hubert's explanation.

HUBERT
(continuing)
Sheriff, would you mind placing a few more rounds from that gun beside the one I'm lookin' at?

Pickman upends Weiss' pistol; the bullets fall into his cupped left hand.

Pickman stands the bullets up beside the first like little toy soldiers.

Hubert swivels his head and lorgnette almost imperceptibly.

HUBERT
(continuing)
An illustration has been etched into the head of each bullet. The etching is of a young woman's face. A pretty, dark-haired gal with a long nose.

Pickman picks up one of the rounds and raises it into the streaming sunlight. He squints as he stares at it, in an effort to discern the image.

PICKMAN
I can barely see it, but I see it.

Hubert, nodding, rests the lorgnette down and looks at Pickman.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
You ever come across bullets like these before?

HUBERT
Never. To carve such detailed work by hand...is far beyond the capabilities of any jeweler I've ever met.

Hubert taps his knob-knuckled fingers on his forehead as he ponders the bullets.

HUBERT
(continuing)
They say that the most skilled Chinese can paint a pretty vista on a single grain of rice. Any chance that this fella's a Chinaman?

Pickman walks over to Weiss' pistol and one by one returns the cartridges to their chambers.

PICKMAN
Nah. He's no Oriental.

Pickman shuts the cylinder with a CLICK.

HUBERT
You gonna lock him up?

Pickman shoves the pistol back into his belt; he tucks his blue shirt further in and shakes his head.

PICKMAN
For having pretty bullets? No law against that.

Hubert seems a little disappointed that no arrest will be made.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Thanks for your time and your knowledge Hubert. You been a big help.

HUBERT
Thanks for keeping our town safe Sheriff. Remember McDonelly's Fine Jewels and Things after the Mayor pays out that bonus he owes you. And you deserve it too- I've never heard of any town this size without a single killing in its books.

Pickman nods, grins, turns and departs.

EXT. PICKMAN'S HOUSE - DUSK

Just beyond the perimeter of downtown Rattleborge lie the houses of its citizens, each set upon half or full acre lots of green grass demarcated by white, brown or yellow picket fences.

Half a mile into this grouping of domiciles sits Sheriff Pickman's house, a dark brown two story edifice with bright yellow fences and trim.

Pickman walks up the stone walkway towards the wooden porch that fronts his house. He carries a brown paper bag, the contents of which are seemingly substantial. He no longer carries Weiss' pistols.

From the yard next door come the shrill GIGGLES of two boys running after each other in a heated game of tag.

Pickman walks up the steps, onto his porch.

Pickman walks over to the cast-iron bootscrape beside the door and drags the soles of his brown leather boots across its ridge, one after the other.

INT. GREETING ROOM - SAME

The Sheriff walks into the greeting area. He rests the bag on a nearby table, hangs his hat and his jacket on the wrought iron coat rack and stretches his arms.

He picks up the brown bag and walks down the hall.

INT. KITCHEN - SAME

Beside the wood-burning stove is a long butcher block counter, at which stands VALERIE, a petite blond woman of forty-three years. Her delicate pretty features belie her age- she could pass for ten or fifteen years younger than she is- but a few hard lines crack the edges of her eyes and the sides of her nose, indicating that she is not in her twenties.

Valerie is busy rolling out the dough for a pie crust and does not notice Pickman enter the room.

He watches her roll out the dough and dust it ceremonially with flour as if she were a holy priest. She presses the heel of her hand into the dough and works it out from the center in circular motions. She picks up a tarnished fork and pricks the dough in a rapid, systematic way.

PICKMAN
You baking that for me, Val?

Valerie looks up from the pie.

VALERIE
No.

Pickman is surprised by his wife's brusque response. He sets down the brown paper bag and walks over to her.

PICKMAN
Somethin' the matter?

VALERIE
Alicia Binfrey's aunt died.

PICKMAN
That's sad...though I wasn't aware that you had any dealings with Alicia Binfrey's aunt.

VALERIE
I don't. I didn't.

Pickman waits for his wife to explain.

Valerie shakes the flour from her hands and SIGHS.

VALERIE
(continuing)
Janice suggested that we all bake pies and take them over to Alicia Binfrey's to show our sorrow at her loss.

PICKMAN
Seems like a considerate thing to do.

VALERIE
It's not. Janice doesn't like Alicia at all, not one bit...she just wants to ingratiate herself to Alicia, now that Alicia's wealthy and has a phonograph.

Pickman shakes his head, disapprovingly.

PICKMAN
Well that seems a bit low.

VALERIE
(nodding)
It is. But if I didn't make anything, Janice and the ladies would spend the entire afternoon at Alicia's making derisive remarks about me. So I made this- to thwart her.

Valerie nods affirming her plan. She points to the pie crust and the nearby bowl containing a macerated cherry, ripe rhubarb and sour brandy filling.

VALERIE
(continuing)
I'll deliver it tomorrow morning- just before the other ladies show up- and express my condolences to Alicia. I'll leave when Janice and the ladies arrive, so that they know they've been beaten. If I have to play their stupid game, I might as well put some matches in their garters.

Pickman's face is split wide by a gigantic grin.

PICKMAN
You're adorable. Even when you're devious you're cuter than a kitten made out of polka-dotted cotton candy.

Pickman licks his thumb and wipes a smudge of flour from his wife's chin.

VALERIE
If I were taller, you would take me more seriously.

PICKMAN
Six days a week I walk around with guns on my hips, looking into the malicious eyes of miscreants, locking up churlish drunks and breaking up disputes, civil and otherwise. When I come home, the last thing I want to be is serious. I want to feel the lightness of youth Val, not the weight of the grave.

Pickman runs his hand over his bare scalp to the point from which his retreating hair has not yet surrendered.

VALERIE
Roger...

PICKMAN
You keep me feeling young Val, and dammit if you don't look exactly the same as when I first met you.

Valerie just stares at her husband, smiling, flushed, her eyes sparkling.

VALERIE
What a flatterer you are, Sheriff.

She leans over and kisses Pickman on the mouth. He wraps his strong arms around her and kisses her back, passionately.

EXT. CATTLEBRUSH CASINO - NIGHT

Men in suits or tuxedos and ladies in formal gowns walk up to the casino's facade, which has an electric sign comprised of small illumined light bulbs reading, 'Cattlebrush.'

INT. CATTLEBRUSH CASINO - NIGHT

The casino is near its capacity, with over one hundred patrons inside, gambling, talking, drinking and laughing.

Ten card tables line one wall and five roulette wheels another. Waitresses selling cigars and carrying drinks weave throughout the seated patrons.

In the back corner is a staircase leading up to an oaken door; beveled into the solitary door are two words, 'Men's Club.'

Three elderly men in worn, denuded tuxedoes walk into the casino's main entrance. Each man clutches the gilded head of a long slender cane in his right hand. They are all tall and slender and posses an impressive amount of white hair, especially when considering that the youngest is at least eighty years old. They are the GOULEY BROTHERS.

A few patrons point to or eyeball the Gouley Brothers.

The Gouley Brothers slowly walk across the casino's polished floor, the crowd parting before them.

They surround a blackjack table and take three seats, beside the two PLAYERS already seated. Each of the Gouley Brothers rests his cane across his lap.

The DEALER, a twenty-five year-old man with a patch over his left eye, SIGHS. The other two PLAYERS at the blackjack table stand up and leave.

The table now belongs to the Gouleys.

Each Gouley tosses two chips to the center of the green felt-covered table, as does the Dealer.

GREG GOULEY
(to the dealer)
Deal.

The dealer slaps cards face down in front of each Gouley and then returns with the face up card: seven of hearts, ace of clubs, and a five of spades.

The Gouleys peek at their hidden cards.

The dealer lays a nine of clubs upon his own face-down card.

GREG GOULEY
(continuing)
Hit.

GARRET GOULEY
Stick.

GODFREY GOULEY
Hit.

The dealer makes his second pass: jack of clubs, and a six of hearts.

GREG GOULEY
I'm busted.

GODFREY GOULEY
Hold.

GARRET GOULEY
(to Godfrey)
I say we double the pot.

Garret throws in four chips. Godfrey nods and throws in four chips.

The Dealer shakes his head.

DEALER
The house folds.

Garret shows his hand: a nine and an ace.

Godfrey shows his hand: a ten, a five and a six.

Godfrey grabs the sixteen chips. He gives five to Garret, five to Greg and keeps the other six.

GODFREY GOULEY
Let's raise the ante.

The Dealer looks sourly at the old men.

Across the way at the bar, sits the diminutive, blonde-haired doll-maker Walter, nursing a large beer stein. He still wears the snug suit that he wore to Sindy's Saloon earlier that day. He watches the Gouley Brothers play cards through the mirror hanging behind the shelves of liquor.

The BARTENDER, a young man with freckles, sandy hair and a red bow-tie, walks over to Walter.

BARTENDER
You want another?

WALTER
Thank you, but I've not yet quaffed this one in its entirety.

The Bartender blinks quizzically at Walter's diction and then turns to walk away to another customer. Walter calls after him.

WALTER
(continuing)
Excuse me sir.

The Bartender turns back around.

WALTER
(continuing)
I wish to put a query to you. Why is it that nobody chooses to play cards with those octogenarians? They seem like respectable gentlemen.

BARTENDER
The Gouley Brothers? Any blackjack table they sit at loses money, plain and simple. One of the Gouleys- I'm not sure which- plays it risky and usually busts. He always goes for twenty-one even if he's got a strong hand like eighteen or nineteen. Another one plays it in the middle, hoping for twenty-one, but sticking with anything higher than sixteen. And the last Gouley, he plays it very safe, in case the other two bust. In the end, they don't care which one wins at all, as long as the house loses. And once they sit, they stay seated until closing time- I've never once seen any of 'em get a drink or go to the toilet.

Walter turns around on the bar stool- from which his short legs dangle like a child's in a high chair- and looks at the Gouley Brothers. Greg Gouley is dividing his newly acquired chips between himself and his two brothers.

Walter turns back to the Bartender.

WALTER
That table can seat as many as nine players. They could be beaten if other people stayed on and played against them.

BARTENDER
Well they got an additional strategy workin' for 'em-- they smell like skunk puke.

The door to the casino swings wide and in steps a man wearing brown pants, a blue shirt, a leather tie and a brown vest with a badge. He is twenty-eight, fit, handsome and has his sandy hair cut so short it looks like velvet. He is DEPUTY COOPERSON.

Two WAITRESSES carrying cigar boxes on silver trays make a beeline for Deputy Cooperson.

Cooperson's hazel eyes flicker to both of the women scuttling towards him, and the cigar boxes nestled below their voluminous cleavage.

Walter enviously watches the pair of shapely women move towards the deputy.

WALTER
I'd wager handsomely that Deputy Cooperson could bed any woman of his choosing in Rattleborge- married or otherwise.

BARTENDER
I'd not take that wager- he could, only he won't: he's a pious man.

Truly devout. And smart too. He studied to be a lawyer back in Massachusetts. Went to some fancy college and everything.

WALTER
How did he wind up in Rattleborge?

The Bartender shrugs.

BARTENDER
Perhaps being Catholic ain't the way to go.

The first Waitress kisses Cooperson on the cheek, slowly with a little, almost inaudible, SIGH.

The second Waitress kisses Cooperson on the opposite side of his face, even more slowly. She MOANS quietly when she withdraws her plush lips from his clean-shaven cheek, where she has painted her lips in carmine.

BARTENDER
(continuing)
Or perhaps being Catholic is the way to go.

INT. HOTEL RUDDINGTON - TEN O'CLOCK PM

Mabelle sits at the hotel counter clutching her book, reading by the light of an oil lamp set upon the counter. Her concentration upon the book she grips is quite tremendous the book is entitled, 'The Weird Black Mask from the Golden Ziggurat of Nango-to.'

She hears a GROAN coming from upstairs.

Mabelle inserts her placeholder, shuts the book and looks worriedly at the stairwell.

After a moment's indecision, she hops off of the stool and walks toward the stairs.

She looks up towards darkened landing of the second floor.

She listens for a moment, but hears nothing.

Mabelle apprehensively puts her foot on the first stair; it CREAKS loudly beneath her.

Something SLAMS loudly upstairs. Mabelle jumps at the abrupt sound.

The chubby receptionist walks back to the counter and lifts the oil lantern by its curved suspension handle. Swallowing her fear, she turns back to the stairwell and walks towards it.

She looks up at the darkened landing of the second floor, raising her lantern aloft, ahead of her.

The luminance of the lantern spills onto the landing, revealing...nothing.

Mabelle ascends the stairwell, each step CREAKING beneath her.

INT. SECOND FLOOR LANDING - SAME

Mabelle, gripping the banister, climbs to the second level.

She walks across the empty landing to the foot of the next stairwell.

Mabelle raises the lantern.

Abraham, wearing a long black robe, is standing on the landing, staring down at her.

Mabelle SCREAMS.

Abraham takes a step down the staircase, towards Mabelle. He is shaking his head back and forth. His scarred face is pale and covered with a sheen of sweat; a lone trickle of blood drips from his right cheek.

ABRAHAM
What is the matter?

Mabelle takes one step back, away from Abraham.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
I mean you no harm sweet child.

MABELLE
I-I heard a n-noise.

ABRAHAM
I apologize if I disturbed you...I will be more considerate in the future. Good evening.

Abraham turns away from Mabelle.

As he walks up the stairs, Mabelle resolves to take charge of the situation.

MABELLE
What're you doing up there, in th-
that room?

Abraham does not turn around, but continues up the stairs and, enshrouded in his black robe, disappears into the darkness.

MABELLE
(continuing)
Excuse me, Mr. Weiss?

The sound of his door being SHUT and then LOCKED is his tacit response.

INT. PICKMAN'S BEDROOM - ELEVEN O'CLOCK

Pickman and Valerie lie in bed together; they are both nude.

A thin sheet covers each them from the waist down.

Valerie lies on her stomach and Pickman on his side, running his weathered fingertips up and down the smooth crevasse in the center of his wife's back.

PICKMAN
Are you gonna make me take another
bath?

VALERIE
No. But perhaps you should wash
out your mustache.

PICKMAN
Nah, I like it when it smells that
way.

Valerie looks into her husband's eyes.

VALERIE
That's sweet.

PICKMAN
Not really. More like calf's liver
mixed with catch of the day.

Valerie playfully pokes Pickman in the side. He CHORTLES.

VALERIE
Well I guess it's a good thing
that your mother made you eat so
much liver when you were little.

PICKMAN
Bein' from Texas ain't all bad.

Pickman kisses his wife on the neck.

VALERIE
Any news from the Mayor on when he's paying out that bonus?

Pickman SIGHS.

PICKMAN
He's got other priorities right now, the harvest-

VALERIE
Don't make excuses for him, Roger. He promised you an additional stipend if you kept this town safe and you have. Not one killing since you've been Sheriff- not one. Besides, we could really use the money.

PICKMAN
I know, I know. I'll talk to him tomorrow. You happy?

VALERIE
I will be in a moment, Sheriff.

Valerie smiles as she slides her hand beneath the sheet, between her husband's legs.

PICKMAN
Woman, you've got one hell of a naughty left hand.

Pickman grabs her left shoulder and rolls her onto her back; he then climbs on top of her, bringing his face immediately before hers. She wraps her legs around him, her feet poking up through the sheet tangled about their waists.

They look into each other's eyes and find a slow rhythm together.

They do not say another word.

INT. MEN'S CLUB WITHIN THE CATTLEBRUSH CASINO - MIDNIGHT

The Men's Club is filled with thick cigar smoke and the five beefy bull-like MEN who exhale it. They sit in plushly upholstered chairs surrounded by ashtrays, leather-bound books and small dark drinks.

Deputy Cooperson opens the door and walks into the room; one of the waitresses, JESS WALKER, showcasing her luminous smile and voluminous cleavage, is hooked to his left elbow. He shuts the door behind him.

HOGAN, a beefy sixty-two year old man in a shinning blue suit with gray pinstripes, looks up through his spectacles at the Deputy and his companion.

HOGAN
(to Cooperson)
Didn't seem to me to be that complicated of a concept. Rather simple in fact, I'd say, especially for a scholar.

DUGAN, his portlier mirror image, nods in agreement.

DUGAN
Especially when considering that superior background he's got.

Hogan inhales deeply through his fat cigar. He exhales.

HOGAN
Men's club.

Cooperson smiles, revealing two perfect rows of teeth.

COOPERSON
(with a slight Boston accent)
I do not plan on staying Mayor Hogan- I promised to escort Miss Walker home this evening. But before I do so, I wanted to stop in and make a recommendation, if I may.

Mayor Hogan looks at Dugan and the other three men's club Bulls.

HOGAN
(to the club members)
Shall I indulge the Deputy?

DUGAN
Indulge the deputy.

Hogan waves theatrically with his cigar.

HOGAN
The Mayor awaits his Deputy's fine and thoughtful council.

COOPERSON
Now I know that you have a lot of things on your table at all times...

HOGAN
(to the Bulls)
Is that...is he...is he remarking upon my...my girth? I thought I was slim and waifish.

The men's club Bulls LAUGH, as does Hogan himself.

HOGAN
(continuing)
Continue Deputy. I was just havin' some fun at my own expense.

COOPERSON
I know you are a busy man, but I wanted to suggest that- if you could find the time- you pay Sheriff Pickman that bonus you have promised him.

HOGAN
I was gettin' around to it, I was gettin' around to it...and I'll swear that to any lord not listenin' right now.

The Bulls LAUGH.

HOGAN
(continuing)
Why you so concerned with Pickman's pay?

COOPERSON
Pickman is a mighty and rightfully proud man and I think he feels embarrassed to ask you about his due...yet he and Mrs. Pickman are still in debt to the bank and living tight. They took out a lot of loans when their little girl became ill...and...and afterwards.

Hogan's jovial demeanor abates; he shakes his head sadly.

HOGAN
Say not another word Cooperson, not another word on the matter. I've been thoughtless. An inconsiderate ass. Best Sheriff in the West deserves his bonus and probably a raise too. It's only because Pickman does such a fine job that I don't think about him nor any o' you Deputies too often-- and that's an entirely truthful fact. I'll see the treasurer about it first thing tomorrow.

Cooperson nods appreciatively.

COOPERSON
Thank you Mayor. Have a good night fellas.

Cooperson turns around, still escorting Jess Walker by the arm.

HOGAN
Aren't you a devout man, Deputy?

Cooperson turns his head and nods.

COOPERSON
I am.

Hogan raises his cigar in the air and points the smoldering end in the direction of Jess Walker's posterior.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
I am escorting Miss Walker home, nothing more.

Jess frowns slightly at the Deputy's words.

Cooperson and Jess leave, shutting the door behind themselves.

Dugan sips some brandy and looks at the Mayor.

DUGAN
You believe the Deputy? You think he's just gonna walk that pretty gal home and not invite himself in?

HOGAN
I do believe him, I do. Deputy Cooperson's head is so full of book knowledge and Jesus that there's no room left for the good stuff.
(beat)
He's the smartest imbecile I ever met.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

Cooperson walks along the avenue, escorting Jess Walker, who now wears a longcoat over her skimpy waitress attire.

Jess stares at Cooperson, while he stares at the stars.

JESS
Thank you for walking me back, Deputy.

COOPERSON
My pleasure. I enjoy any opportunity to serve the people of Rattleborge and admire the majestic creations of the Lord.

Jess is disappointed by his answer; Cooperson is oblivious to her reaction.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Have you ever seen the aurora borealis, Miss Walker- the northern lights?

JESS
What're those?

COOPERSON
It's a diaphanous sheet of light that floats at the top world. Some scientists think that it's a reflection of the sun from the other side of the world, but that's too simple and moreover it doesn't explain why it's there.

JESS
Why do you think it's there, Deputy?

COOPERSON
I think it's God's way of saying, 'I am here and I will protect you.'

Directly in front of Ermine's Barbershop, Jess stops walking and turns to face Cooperson. She looks at him, closes her eyes and tilts her head back, waiting to be kissed.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
You are a pretty woman Jess Walker- painfully pretty- but I am afraid that we had best keep walking.

Jess opens her eyes, which sparkle with tears. Cooperson takes her arm again and they continue to walk up the avenue.

Up ahead, Cooperson see two MEN engaging in a heated argument.

COOPERSON
(continuing; calling ahead)
Simmer down there, gentlemen!

The two MEN continue arguing. Cooperson looks at Jess.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Just a moment Miss Walker.

Cooperson jogs over to the arguing Men.

One of them hold a broken bottle, the other a knife.

With his right hand, Cooperson withdraws one of his two pistols. He points it at the ground.

BLAM.

The two Men look over at him.

Cooperson draws his second pistol. In an instant, he trains a barrel at each man's left kneecap.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Drop your weapons unless you like the idea of limping for the rest of your days. I swear to Christ almighty that I will not ask you second time.

The Men stare at him, the fury of their argument rapidly abating.

The first man drops his knife; the second man tosses the neck of the broken bottle towards the barbershop.

Cooperson lowers his pistols, but keeps them drawn.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
What was the squabble about? A girl? Someone cheated at cards? Someone insulted someone's boots or hat? Trust me fellas, whatever it is, it's not worth getting knifed, gouged, shot in the leg or locked up over. Pick up your hats.

The Men walk over to their respective hats and put them on again. They both stare at the ground.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Charlie you walk north, Haskell you walk south. If either of you turn around- even for a moment- I'll throw you in jail for a whole week for disturbing the peace. If there is some legal matter that needs judicial resolution, take it to the courts in the morning. Start walking.

Each Man nods, turns away and walks off.

Cooperson walks back to Jess Walker, his eye vacillating between the retreating men. He holsters his two pistols.

Jess stares at Cooperson, impressed.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Sorry about that Miss Walker.

Cooperson takes Jess' arm and continues up the street.

JESS
Why don't you like me Deputy? Is it because I'm a widow or I'm not educated enough to know about the northern lights? Is it because I have a daughter waitin' for me at home or that I make a livin' wearing immodest clothing?

COOPERSON
It is no reflection on you whatsoever, but I am the Lord's man.

JESS
Why'd you even come to Rattleborge, if you don't want a wife or a family or nothin'? Why didn't you become a lawyer like you went to school for?

COOPERSON
The devil's hand tangled up the laws out east- made a quagmire of simple right and wrong- and I could no longer do His bidding in such a convoluted and specious system. Out here, I can do His work and help His people.

JESS
But you walk me home all of the time, me! You pick me, when all of the girls like you- and Annie and Stacy are much prettier besides- but you pick me and everytime I think, 'This is the time, this is the time he's gonna come inside.' But you don't, you don't ever come in.

Cooperson looks at the upset woman and shakes his head, somewhat remorsefully.

COOPERSON
Nor will I. I never intended to mislead you...I thought by now you would understand what kind of a fellow I am.

Jess is about to respond, but shakes her head and looks away from him.

EXT. JESS WALKER'S HOUSE - MIDNIGHT

The house is a small A-frame house, with a tiny attic serving as its second floor. The blue moonlight reaches through the surrounding trees, dappling the plain, unpainted wood.

Cooperson and Jess walk up to the front door.

JESS
Thank you for walking me home, Deputy.

COOPERSON
Goodnight ma'am.

Jess nods and enters her house, sullen and dejected.

Cooperson stays outside as Jess shuts the door from within.

Cooperson turns away from the house and begins to walk towards the road.

He grits his teeth and begins to perspire. He turns around and looks again at Jess's house.

The Deputy is deeply conflicted.

After another moment's deliberation, Cooperson walks towards the front door, but just before he reaches it, he walks into the trees nearby and hides.

COOPERSON
(continuing; muttering)
Oh Christ.

Cooperson walks deeper into the copse of trees abutting the house. His forehead glistens with sweat. He turns back and looks again at Jess' house.

Cooperson looks into a bedroom window at the rear of the home.

BETTY, a girl of five years, lies asleep in her bed.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Christ.

Cooperson looks at Betty's long eyelashes...and her pudgy little lips...and her long golden hair...and her curled little fingers. His eyes fill with tears.

Betty turns over in her small, polka-dotted bed; her

nightgown droops from her left shoulder.

Cooperson stares at her with a wanton look in his eyes. His composure is utterly rigid. He swallows as his eyes roam across her face and arms and pristine white neck...

Cooperson punches the trunk of the tree he hides behind. He punches it again. And again.

The Deputy looks at his knuckles which are now abraded and bleeding. He turns away from the window and flees the copse, beneath the watchful blue orb of the moon.

EXT. WALTER'S HOUSE - SAME

Walter, the diminutive dollmaker, walks up the dusty suburban road towards his home- a yellow one-storey house set upon a half-acre of land.

He nears the wooden gate that surrounds his property. Atop the gate are the carved heads of his four wooden sentries: a bear snarling, a dog growling, an alligator baring its teeth and a lion roaring.

Grabbing the lion's head, Walter swings the gate open and enters his property. He shuts the gate behind him and walks on the path of broken stone towards his front door.

He does not see the man who watches him from the shadows of the trees nearby.

That man is Abraham Weiss.

INT. CHURCH SOCIAL HALL - HALF PAST MIDNIGHT

The high hall is filled with exhausted dancers and fatigued onlookers. Only seven couples are currently able to keep up with the indefatigable pianist, an African American man nicknamed MANGO. The shirt he wears beneath his brown suit is the very color of his favorite fruit. His up-tempo music reverberates throughout the vast enclosure.

Amongst those still dancing are Grant and Donna Tylor the Second, both of whom are red-faced and practically delirious.

Mango hammers out a quick twelve bar shuffle for the churchgoers. Occasionally, while pushing the tempo, he throws in a clashing block chord. The dancers do not notice, but some of the older people seated along the walls throw a suspicious eye his way.

GRANT
(panting)
Don't hold back, Mango!
(gasp)
Don't...don't spare us...us white folk nothin'!

Mango switches meter, momentarily disorienting the revelers.

For a brief moment, all of the dancers are lost, helplessly swimming in between the beats of music.

An old man falls to the floor, with an awkward THUMP.

At the head of the next measure, the dancers find the skipping beat and move accordingly.

Mango opens his mouth wide.

MANGO
(singing)
The swamp is breeeeeeeeathing...

He runs a diminished scale down the upright piano.

MANGO
(continuing; singing)
The bats, they are
whiiiiiiiiirling...

He runs another diminished scale, down the keyboard and then up it again.

MANGO
(continuing; singing)
And the white folk, the white folk
talk to the woman in the woods...

Grant whirls Donna around, spellbound by the music.

Hubert McDonelly, the red-faced jeweller, and his wife ELIZA, watch Mango, their lips wrinkled with disdain.

MANGO
(continuing; singing)
Sally, Sally, Sally, Sally, give
us back the little ones. Sally,
Sally, Saaaaaaaaaaallly. Where
are the little ones?

He pounds a chord.

MANGO
(continuing; singing)
'In the swamp,' she says, 'In the
swamp, the little ones're flying,
flyyyyyyyinnnnng.'

Donna and Grant whirl in ecstasy.

EXT. ALICIA BINFREY'S MANSION - SAME

Set upon a five acre lot at the edge of town sits Alicia Binfrey's mansion, a three story behemoth of a house, painted an off-white color, trimmed with maroon.

Valerie, in a light blue dress, walks towards the imposing edifice, holding a wicker basket in her right hand and a small white parasol in her left. She walks along a path of colored pebbles.

As she nears the mansion, she sees two African American WOMEN tending a flower garden at the edge of the property. They talk animatedly to each other as they clip brambles and twist vines.

The older of the duo sees Valerie and nudges her companion.

Their conversation abruptly ceases.

VALERIE
Good morning ladies.

The duo watches Valerie approach.

OLDER GARDENER
Good mornin' Mrs. Pickman.

YOUNGER GARDENER
Good mornin' Mrs. Pickman.

VALERIE
The garden seems to be comin' along beautifully.

OLDER GARDENER
Thank you very much Mrs. Pickman.

YOUNGER GARDENER
Thank you very much Mrs. Pickman.

Valerie nods as she passes the two women, headed up the hill towards the mansion. A moment before she is out of earshot, the two Gardeners resume their lively conversation.

Valerie reaches the front door. She collapses the parasol and sets her wicker basket upon the stone porch. She looks at the mother of pearl button beside the varnished mahogany double doors. She presses the button: DING DING DING DONG.

Valerie smiles at the novelty of the electric doorbell.

CLICKING FOOTSTEPS reverberate within. The door opens. A BUTLER, a silver-haired man of seventy, swings the door open.

BUTLER
(English accent)
Good morning Mrs. Pickman.

Valerie looks puzzled.

BUTLER
(continuing)
Are you here to visit the bereaved Mistress of the house?

VALERIE
Why're you talkin' like an Englishman?

BUTLER
The Mistress of the house has requested it of me.

From within the mansion, reverberates the sound of a woman's

RAUCOUS LAUGHTER.

BUTLER
(continuing)
Are you here to visit the bereaved Mistress of the house?

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Show her inside, Ralph!

BUTLER
(pointing to the wicker basket)
May I please assist you with your burden?

VALERIE
It's just a pie- I can manage it. But feel free to hang this someplace.

She hands the Butler her collapsed parasol.

BUTLER
Please enter the house of mourning.

More RAUCOUS LAUGHTER reverberates within.

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION SITTING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Valerie, carrying her wicker basket, walks into the thickly carpeted room, three walls of which are hung with paintings and tapestries. The fourth wall is entirely glass and looks out onto the hedge maze at the rear of the house.

Alicia Binfrey, wearing a lavender kimono, sits on a plush divan reading the newspaper. She is stunningly beautiful, in a ravishing way that makes other women feel diminished when nearby.

Alicia looks up from the paper, her green eyes shining beneath her black eyelashes.

ALICIA
Good morning Mrs. Pickman. What brings you here this sparkling and crisp day?

Valerie does not know exactly how to respond.

VALERIE
I heard of your aunt's passing and I wanted to offer you my husband's and my own condolences.

ALICIA
Well thank you for that most heartfelt sentiment.

Valerie cannot tell whether of not Alicia is being facetious.

VALERIE
I baked you a pie.

Alicia smirks.

ALICIA
Thank you.

VALERIE
Were you close with your aunt?

ALICIA
No. I met her once when I was twelve. She took me to the county fair and I threw up on her. I never saw her again.

Alicia smirks. Valerie smirks.

ALICIA
(continuing)
Where are you from Mrs. Pickman? Texas?

VALERIE
No, my husband is from there, but I was born and raised in Colorado.

ALICIA
Did they have an opera house in Colorado?

VALERIE
They did and I went to it every chance I could.

Alicia nods, cogitating, pondering...

ALICIA
I need to escape the premises before Janice and her preening, sententious friends come to call on me, but if you'd like to hear my phonograph perhaps we can schedule a later time for you to do so.

Valerie nods enthusiastically.

VALERIE
I would like to see it- and hear it- very much.

ALICIA
I thought you might. Are you engaged later this evening, Mrs. Pickman?

VALERIE
I am not- my husband is on duty. And call me Valerie.

ALICIA
Come back tonight at around seven o'clock and we'll listen to some handsome Italian tenors while drinking some fine Italian wine.

VALERIE
That would be wonderful Alicia.

ALICIA
Please...call me Miss Binfrey.

She is not joking.

EXT. OSCAR'S LUNCHEONETTE - TEN O'CLOCK AM

Rubbing his belly, Sheriff Pickman exits Oscar's Luncheonette, followed by Deputy Cooperson and DEPUTY BARTLEY, a stocky strong-jawed thirty-year old man with a big black mustache and thick black eyebrows.

Pickman looks at the bandages on Cooperson's knuckles.

PICKMAN
Anything happen last night I should know 'bout?

COOPERSON
Nothing worth describing in detail--three civil squabbles and some general churlishness, nothing terribly relevant.

Pickman nods; he and Cooperson look north on the central avenue. Bartley turns south and sees, amidst the morning traffic of pedestrians and carriages, Mayor Hogan and his obsequious men's club pal Dugan driving towards them.

PICKMAN
I ate too much. I could lie down right here in the road an take a nap.

BARTLEY
I'd advise against that boss. Turn around.

Pickman and Cooperson turn south and see the Mayor's horseless carriage puttering towards them.

All three lawmen remove their hats.

The car PUTTERS and COUGHS as it pulls up the dusty avenue.

PICKMAN
Mayor.

BARTLEY
Mayor.

COOPERSON
Mayor.

HOGAN
Sheriff. Deputies.

Dugan nod to the men, but does not address them and is not himself addressed.

Hogan looks at the painted glass storefront of Oscar's Luncheonette behind the three lawmen.

HOGAN
(continuing)
Well, I'd say that that there establishment is one helluva safe place to get a chicken-fried steak, yes indeed, yes indeed.
(to Dugan)
Might even be kinda hard to read the menu in there, what with all them blinding badges shining everywhichway. A veritable constellation of legal icons.

Dugan nods in affirmation.

DUGAN
A very safe place, for certain.

PICKMAN
What can I do for you Mayor Hogan?

HOGAN
Not a damn thing other than what you been doing since Sheriff Reddington retired.

Hogan reaches into his suit pocket and withdraws a wax-sealed envelope. He hands the parcel to Pickman.

HOGAN
(continuing)
That's the bonus I been remiss on payin' you. And you're not allowed to thank me for it, since it's your due.

Pickman tacitly nods his thanks.

Hogan leans over and releases the clutch of his flatulent vehicle.

HOGAN
(continuing)
You might also be pleased to know that you no longer owe any more money to the Bank of Rattleborge.

Pickman, mouth agape, looks up at the Mayor.

PICKMAN
Mayor Hogan, you didn't have to go and-

HOGAN
Was nothin'. Bank owed me some favors and now they owe one less.

Hogan clears his throat in a spectacular manner involving his cheeks and chins and eyes and all ten of his fingers.

HOGAN
(continuing)
Well, we gotta scram fellas, before our wives catch us out scootin' 'round. They ain't too fond of us enjoyin' ourselves in any manner whatsoever. My wife sees me smilin' in my sleep, she wakes me up right quick.

In a PUTTING, SPUTTERING tumult, Hogan and Dugan drive off.

Pickman slides the envelope in his vest.

BARTLEY
You should see if he shorted you.

PICKMAN
Nah, he didn't...besides I want Val to open it.

INT. SINDY'S SALOON - SAME

Walter, the diminutive dollmaker, walks into Sindy's unlit establishment. The swinging doors admit and then block the streaming sunlight, in slow alternation.

SINDY (O.S.)
We're closed.

WALTER
It is I.

SINDY (O.S.)
Look in the spittoon.

Walter is confused by the recommendation made by the shadow-obscured proprietor.

WALTER
Pardon me?

SINDY (O.S.)
The spittoon. Go look inside it.

Walter looks at the spittoon at the far edge of the bar; it sits atop the sawdust-strewn floor like a squat little man.

Walter approaches the spittoon warily. He looks inside.

Covered with the ichor of spitting tobacco and other viscous detritus, is the doll he made of and for Sindy.

SINDY (O.S.)
(continuing)
I thought you should know before you went ahead and made another.

Walter looks into the shadows, a baleful look in his eyes.

WALTER
I spent two weeks crafting that miniature which now lay despoiled, besotted, sullied by the expectorations of rogues.

Sindy steps out of the shadows and looks at the little man.

SINDY
Do you think that usin' them big words somehow makes you a bigger man? Do you?

Walter opens his mouth to reply, but no words come to him.

SINDY
(continuing)
I didn't want to be cruel, but I don't know how to get you to stop pesterin' me. You been after me since the week after my husband was buried and lookin' back, I'm surprised you even waited the week. Why just yesterday you said 'You shan't see me anymore,' but look now- here you are, very visible.

Walter's gaze grows cold and penetrating.

WALTER
Do whatever you please with your remaining three years.

SINDY
Three years?

WALTER
I can tell by the lines in your face, the circumference of your ankles, the limpness of your hair and the elasticity of your dermis that your beauty will begin to deteriorate, rapidly, three years from now.

SINDY
Is that so?

WALTER
What did you mother look like when she was three years older than you are now?

Sindy's eyes narrow with undisguised hatred.

SINDY
Get out.

Walter nonchalantly turns around and exits the Saloon.

Sindy turns and looks at herself in the mirror behind the bar. She touches the skin beneath her eyes.

EXT. TWENTY PACES OUT OF TOWN - LATE AFTERNOON

A gray mass of storm clouds coalesce over the town.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman walks a handcuffed PRISONER towards the town jail.

AT THE VERY TOP OF THE AVENUE- MORE THAN FIFTY YARDS AWAY-

Pickman sees his wife jogging across the avenue.

Valerie has a brown bag between her arms and is clearly hurrying in an effort to beat the storm.

Pickman opens his mouth to call to her, but looking at the Prisoner he currently has in custody, decides not to get her attention.

PRISONER
You always eyein' me Sheriff. Me and my little brother. You're biased against us, you are.

PICKMAN
I don't engage in debates with prisoners. Shut up.

Pickman watches Valerie disappear onto the dirt road just beyond McDonelly's Fine Jewel's and Things.

EXT. TOWN JAIL - TWILIGHT

Pickman walks out of the jailhouse. He looks at the sky.

The gray clouds are turning black.

Mango, wearing a brown suit, a brown derby and a mango-colored shirt, walks up to the Sheriff.

MANGO
That's a mighty mean lookin' storm hangin' up there Sheriff.

Pickman nods.

MANGO
(continuing)
Kinda looks like a giant eye, don't it?

Pickman nods.

EXT. HOTEL RUDDINGTON - MOMENTS LATER

Deputy Cooperson and Deputy Bartley stand outside of the hotel. Cooperson is reading from his carrying Bible; Bartley is picking at his wide teeth with a toothpick while looking at the amassed storm clouds above.

Pickman saunters up to them. They nod their salutations.

Pickman strikes a match on his boot heel.

A lone raindrop SPLATS on the lit match, extinguishing it with a HISS.

EXT. MCDONELLY'S FINE JEWELS AND THINGS - MOMENTS LATER

Hubert steps out of his store. He shuts the door behind him.

With his oversized, knob-knuckled fingers, Hubert withdraws a brass key, licks it, and inserts it into the top lock. He twists it. CLICK.

Two raindrops land upon Hubert's bald, red head. SPLAT, SPLAT.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

The Gouley Brothers walk abreast each other up the street.

They hold their canes in their right hands. Each man is struck by a falling raindrop. SPLAT. SPLAT. SPLAT.

EXT. ERMINE'S BARBERSHOP - MOMENTS LATER

The barbershop has been locked up. The praying-mantis like barber stares up at the dark congregation in the sky. He holds a cake covered in whipped cream between his hands.

Four raindrops SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT into the foamy frosting which coats the confection, leaving little craters in the sea of frozen white waves.

EXT. GRANT AND DONNA TYLOR'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Grant and Donna Tylor the Second stand out in the front yard of their cute tall narrow house, looking up at the sky.

Grant SNAPS open an umbrella, and shields his wife from five falling raindrops: SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT.

EXT. THE MAYOR'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Mayor Hogan and Dugan ride the PUTTERING, WHEEZING vehicle up the dirt driveway that leads to the front entrance of the Mayor's wide, proud three-storey home. Rain falls towards Hogan's forehead, spectacles and lit cigar as well as Dugan's cigar and open timepiece.

SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT-HISS, SPLAT-HISS, SPLAT.

EXT. ALICIA BINFREY'S MANSION - MOMENTS LATER

Valerie Pickman, carrying the brown paper bag she had earlier, jogs up the colored-pebble path, past the flower garden, towards the front of the Binfrey Mansion. Behind her, rain strikes the pebbles: SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT.

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION SITTING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Alicia Binfrey looks out of the enormous window covering the rear wall of the sitting room, facing the hedge mazes.

Rain strikes against the window: SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT.

EXT. SINDY'S SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

Sindy stands at the front of her establishment, wrinkling her nose. Rain strikes the overhang she stands beneath: SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT. She shakes her head, turns around and hangs a sign on the door: 'CLOSED.'

EXT. OSCAR'S LUNCHEONETTE - MOMENTS LATER

Walter walks out of the eatery, looking at the sky. He puts on his wide brim hat, mutters a curse and steps out into the rain. SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT.

EXT. CATTLEBRUSH CASINO - MOMENTS LATER

Jess Walker, clad only in her skimpy waitress attire, runs towards the front door of the casino. The rain comes down upon her. SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT.

Two Bulls from the Men's Club- both tucked safely beneath the overhang- watch the damp woman's bouncing beeline with undisguised pleasure.

INT. ROOM THREE R AT HOTEL RUDDINGTON - MOMENTS LATER

The room is cloaked in darkness, excepting only the light that sneaks in through the crack beneath the door. A dark form moves within the room, walking back and forth. The sound of rain striking the roof can be heard within: SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT, SPLAT.

ABRAHAM
(whispering)
Wachet auf, Adelaide, wachet!

EXT. TWENTY PACES OUT OF TOWN - NIGHT

Night has fallen over Rattleborge and with it a deluge of HISSING rain.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - NINE O'CLOCK

The THUNDEROUS downpour of rain makes it appear as if the road is a pot of boiling water. The deluge is so powerful that it is impossible to see more than thirty feet in any direction while standing within it. The rain ROARS like fire, attacking everything exposed in the city of Rattleborge.

Materializing in the blur of rain, are three black triangles, pointed at the top and broad at the bottom. The black triangles move in tandem up the central avenue. They look like bats, except that from the bottom of the triangles extend legs, establishing them as plantigrade beings.

The wet boots upon these legs churn the muddy road, but the footsteps cannot be heard within the roaring conflagration of the downpour. The black triangles move up the avenue, dark phantoms adrift in the unnatural storm. They stop momentarily and then veer to the left.

The black triangles continue forward; they pass through the yellow light spilled from a half-shut window. The triangles are three MEN in black ponchos.

A hand emerges from the beneath the central poncho. The hand holds a compass. The hand then disappears beneath the poncho and a moment later reappears, pointing northeast.

The three poncho-covered Men move eastward towards the suburban area of town, though they cannot see where they are going, nor can they be seen. The central man speaks, his voice only audible to the two men immediately beside him.

CENTRAL MAN
Let me see your timepieces, gentlemen.

From beneath the two flanking ponchos, come hands clutching pocket watches. The central Man withdraws his own and surveys all three in a quick moment.

CENTRAL MAN
(continuing)
Good. We meet at midnight by the town sign and then return to our horses.

The hands retract beneath their respective ponchos.

MAN ON THE RIGHT
Got it.

MAN ON THE LEFT
I understand.

From the edges of the three ponchos emerge the gleaming barrels of pistols and shotguns. The men disperse in three different directions.

In five steps they look like no more than blurry black triangles.

In twelve steps they have all but vanished into the rain-occluded night.

In twenty steps, they are wholly absorbed by the ROARING waters of The Crone's Cataract.

INT. HUBERT MCDONELLY'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The storm ROARS loudly outside: there is no thunder or lightning, just a brutal and relentless downpour. Hubert, the red-faced jeweler, sits across from his wife, Eliza, a plump and pale woman in a many-layered nightgown. A candle rests in the center of the table that they sit at, illumining the finely knit tablecloth, two wedges of cheese and the nutty pumpernickel loaf they have been picking at for several hours.

ELIZA
What!?!

HUBERT
I said, 'It's pointless trying to hold conversation when the storm is this bad.'

Eliza shakes her head.

ELIZA
can't hear you over the storm- I can't hear anything but the storm!

Hubert stands up and lifts his chair- a nicely worked and very heavy maple walnut fullback- from the ground.

ELIZA
(continuing)
Don't strain yourself, dear.

Hubert carries his chair around the table and sets it next to his wife. She smiles at him. He sits down in the chair.

Eliza pats him on the shoulder.

ELIZA
(continuing)
Always were a strong one, full of energy and romantic notions.

Hubert nods, pleased with himself. Eliza cuts a sizable piece from the wedge of sharp cheddar and then cuts off the end of the pumpernickel loaf. She rests the cheese neatly upon the bread and hands it to Hubert. He takes the bread and cheese and bites into it.

A hand emerges from the shadows and SLAPS the food from Hubert. Eliza is then SLAPPED. She SCREAMS. She is SLAPPED again and stops her screaming. Hubert, mouth agape looks up.

Rodney, the hood of his poncho drawn back from his porcine face, stands at the end of the table. He wears the drooping-rim blue hat and the yellow kerchief tied around his neck that he wore out on the plains a few weeks earlier. He draws a pistol and presses the barrel to Hubert's forehead.

Eliza is about to scream again, but Rodney shakes his head.

RODNEY
Screamin' ain't gonna do nothin'.

Nobody can hear you through that storm, not even your next door neighbor.

HUBERT
What do you want from us?

RODNEY
A businessman. I like that.

Makes things go smoother, that kinda attitude. Here's the situation. Mrs. McDonelly goes and gets all the cash and jewels and valuables you got stashed in this house. While she's gone, you tell me everything she's gonna find, down to the last dollar and fancy bauble. If she comes back without some of the stuff you mention, or if she comes back with more than what you told me about, someone is gonna get shot for bein' deceitful.

Eliza's eyes are frozen in fear, as is the rest of her.

RODNEY
(continuing; to Eliza)
Get to it. You got two minutes before I start beatin' up on him. Get me everthing of value and put it in a pillowcase.

Eliza stands up, takes one step and doubles over. She is shaking.

RODNEY
(continuing)
I'll put that cheese knife in your husband's eye if you don't git right now.

Eliza stands and stumbles from the room; her face is bright red from being struck.

RODNEY
(continuing)
So how much cash should I be expectin' the old lady to return with?

Hubert is shaking horribly. His mouth opens and shuts like a fish tossed on dry land; his giant knobby hands tremble.

HUBERT
We...we have t-two thousand seven hundred dollars in cash-- we don't t-trust the bank.

Rodney nods, pleased with the amount.

RODNEY
And what might be my new inventory of sparkly things and whatnots?

HUBERT
I'm not exactly sure...I think we have a dozen pearl necklaces, some silver timepieces- and one gold one- and two wedding bands. And also a mother of pearl brooch inlaid with sapphire and platinum ingot.

RODNEY
Sounds like you treat the old lady right. Good for you old man.

Eliza returns, clasping a nearly filled pillowcase.

RODNEY
(continuing)
Bring it here.

Eliza apprehensively walks towards Rodney.

RODNEY
(continuing)
Open it so's I can take a gander inside.

Eliza opens the pillowcase; Rodney glances inside. He sees: the glimmer of jewelry and three tall stacks of bills.

RODNEY
(continuing)
Put the sack on the table.

Eliza rests the loot-filled pillowcase on the table.

BANG. The back of Hubert McDonelly's head erupts in a welter of gore. Rodney points his gun at Eliza who is now SHRIEKING.

CUT TO:

EXT. HUBERT MCDONELLY'S HOUSE - SAME

The side window flickers with the FLASH of the second gunshot, though the report is completely muffled by the THUNDEROUS deluge of the downpour.

INT. ERMINE'S STUDY - SAME

Ermine, the praying-mantis like barber, sits in a plush chair reading a book by the light of a hanging oil lamp.

He wears a long nightgown and a night cap on his head. The storm ROARS outside, yet he reads with a very intense focus.

ERMINE
(while reading)
Son of a gun.

He turns the page with a quick, insect-like gesture and then reaches for a glass of warmed milk. He sips a little and then replaces the glass on the stand, without ever taking his eyes from the book.

ERMINE
(continuing; reading)
You don't say?

Ermine turns the page. He continues reading.

ERMINE
(continuing; reading)
That's it now, you can do it little fella!

Ermine smiles as his eyes rapidly scan the pages before him.

A hand reaches from the darkness and grabs the book. Ermine looks up.

Standing in front of him, poncho hood drawn back, is the handsome, blonde-haired, greenish-blue-eyed and finely mustached Billy Lee; his gun is pointed at Ermine's face.

Billy Lee tosses the book to the floor where it lands with a THUMP.

BILLY LEE
Take me to the safe.

Ermine shakes his head.

ERMINE
don't have-

BILLY LEE
I will hurt you if you start weaving fabrications, Ermine Ducat. I'd rather avoid such unpleasantness, as I'm sure would you.

Ermine nods his head. He stands up, lifts the hanging oil lantern from its suspension hook and walks towards the doorway that leads into the bedroom.

Billy Lee's greenish-blue eyes follow the agile old man, as does the barrel of his pistol.

INT. ERMINE'S BEDROOM - SAME

The circle of light from the lamp spills onto the long slender bed which sits isolated in the center of the unlit room. Upon the wall above the bed's headboard hangs a painted picture of a radiant woman standing beside Ermine, thirty years younger than he currently is.

Ermine rests the lantern upon his night stand and walks over to the painting. With an I insect-like motion, he reaches over and pulls the painting down.

Billy Lee looks at the blank gray iron of the small safe nestled in the wall.

ERMINE
Please don't look at the combination, I don't want to have to buy another one after you leave-- they're quite expensive you know.

BILLY LEE
I cannot see the numbers from here.

Ermine nods, satisfied. In some odd, ritualistic safe-opening preparation, Ermine moistens his lips with his carmine tongue three times. He twists the combination lock to the right, whistling a high pitch, and then to the left, whistling a low pitch, and then wildly to the right again, whistling a high pitch.

Ermine twists the handle- CLUNK; he pulls the door open. He darts his hands inside.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
Withdraw your hands slowly if you want to live to see the end of this storm.

Ermine pulls out five stacks of bills and a gold timepiece.

ERMINE
Never did trust the bank.

Ermine walks towards Billy Lee, proffering the money.

BILLY LEE
Set that down on the bed.

Ermine drops the money and whirls around, a straight razor in his hand. Billy Lee pivots the point of his pistol.

BANG.

Ermine falls to his knees. His right hand has been blown clean off of his arm.

Billy Lee picks up the stacks of money with his left hand.

Ermine stares glassy-eyed at the white bone, yellow tissue and pink flesh at the terminus of his right arm. A moment later, blood drenches the wound and flows onto the floor.

Billy Lee points the gun at Ermine's face.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERMINE'S HOUSE - SAME

Barely visible- and totally inaudible- in the ROARING downpour of rain, is the flash of a gunshot in the bedroom window of the house.

INT. GOULEY MANSION GREETING ROOM - SAME

The grand enclosure is lit by a lone candle. The room features a hanging fan (not on), two electric lights (not on) and three dead stuffed animals: a boar, a tiger and a bear.

The Gouley Brothers, dressed in their denuded tuxedos, stand in the room, staring at the floor-to-ceiling window beside the front door. The rain ROARS outside.

GREG GOULEY
I think we should go.

GARRET GOULEY
It's too wet out there. We'd probably catch the shivers.

GODFREY GOULEY
We can't play cards here?

GREG GOULEY
Against whom, each other? What would that accomplish? I think we should go.

GARRET GOULEY
As you said, as you said. But you are a risk-taker...and you almost always go bust trying to get blackjack.

GREG GOULEY
I like the excitement.

GARRET GOULEY
It's dangerous going out there in this weather. I think we should play it safe.

GODFREY GOULEY
Me too. I'm holding, I'm sticking right here.

The front door swings open.

The sound of the ROARING storm fills the room.

GREG GOULEY
It's a sign. It's a sign that we should go.

A poncho-covered Man enters the greeting room. He kicks the door shut behind himself. SLAM. He keeps the hood of his poncho drawn over his face.

The barrel of a shotgun pokes out of an opening at the center of the poncho. An instant later, a long-barreled revolver emerges just above it.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
Godfrey Gouley.

GODFREY GOULEY
(nervous)
Yes?

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
Go upstairs, open your safe and bring the contents to me. You have two minutes.

GODFREY GOULEY
You want the poker chips too?

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
No.

As quickly as his eighty-two year old limbs will allow, Godfrey Gouley walks towards and then up the grand stairway, gripping the balustrade. The remaining two Gouleys stare at the Intruder.

GARRET GOULEY
Please don't harm my brothers. I'm the oldest one if-

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
No talking.

Greg and Garret Gouley look at the intruder. His face is indiscernible within the wet shadows of his poncho hood. The brothers shift nervously; their breathing is quick and shallow.

The poncho-cloaked Intruder does not move. He stands stone still, the barrels of his weapons trained on the Gouleys.

Greg's eyes fill with tears. He begins to shake. Garret takes his brother's hand and squeezes it reassuringly. Tears slowly track down Greg's face.

The Intruder remains still, standing in the puddle of rainwater which drips from his black and shining poncho.

Godfrey, holding a box in his arms, descends the stairway.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
Set the box beside me.

Godfrey, breathing hard, clambers over to the Intruder. He sets the box beside the puddle pooled around the Intruder's feet.

The shadow-obscured head swivels slightly within the poncho.

Garret squeezes Greg's hand.

CUT TO:

EXT. GOULEY MANSION - SAME

The long window beside the front door FLASHES three times in rapid succession.

Nothing is heard but the ROAR of the rain.

INT. GRANT AND DONNA TYLOR'S BEDROOM - SAME

Rodney has the couple at gunpoint. Donna, standing beside the bed, holds a sheet up against her nude body; Grant slowly pulls up a pair of long underwear, his thoughts elsewhere.

RODNEY
(to Grant)
You thinkin' about bein' a hero?

Grant does not reply.

RODNEY
(continuing)
Yup. Heroes are quiet...and when they're quiet it means they're thinkin'. But I don't want you thinkin', I want you doin'. Doin' what I say.

Rodney advances towards Donna and presses the tip of his pistol to her right breast.

Grant's face is bright red with suppressed rage, but he does nothing.

RODNEY
(continuing; to Grant)
Git me them stones real quick. And if those heroic thoughts start pesterin' you again, think about my partners waitin' outside in the rain, cold and wet and looking for warmth. They'll do things to your wife that I'm not comfortable even talkin' about in front o' her.

Grant walks over to the credenza. He opens a drawer.

Rodney presses the tip of his pistol deeper into Donna's bosom; she YELPS.

Grant withdraws a velvet pouch.

RODNEY
(continuing)
Pour 'em out beneath the 'lectric lamp so I can gaze upon their sparklin' spendor.

Grant unfastens the leather strap holding the pouch shut and upends the contents into the pool of light on the credenza's polished surface. Diamonds roll out, sparkling and brilliant.

Rodney's wide eyes reflect the diamonds like little bursts of white fireworks.

EXT. GRANT AND DONNA TYLOR'S HOUSE - SAME

A light FLASHES in the bedroom, followed by a second FLASH, both reports are totally inaudible amidst the POUNDING downpour.

EXT. TALL WHITE HOUSE - LATER

A window FLASHES with the silent flash of a gun.

EXT. WIDE YELLOW HOUSE WITH A BARN - LATER

A window FLASHES.

It FLASHES a second time.

It FLASHES a third and fourth time in rapid succession.

INT. HOTEL RUDDINGTON - ELEVEN O'CLOCK

Sheriff Pickman, Deputy Cooperson and Deputy Bartley sit in the lobby of the hotel. The sound of the ROARING rain fills the room. Pickman reads a newspaper and Cooperson reads from his pocket bible. Bartley, bored, picks at his fingernails.

Mabelle sits at the counter, reading her tightly clutched book.

Finishing a troublesome cuticle, Bartley looks up at the front window.

BARTLEY
Can't even see the other side of the street.

Pickman glances up briefly from his paper and then looks down again.

PICKMAN
Nope.

BARTLEY
Where do you suppose that Abraham Weiss fellow is?

PICKMAN
Don't know. Maybe he's at Sindy's, if she's open. Maybe

Nestor's Lounge. Maybe Cattlebrush's.

Bartley NODS.

BARTLEY
You don't think maybe he got back to his room somehow? Climbed in through the window, sneakily?

PICKMAN
I don't think that that's at all likely. But if you want to go check his room again, go ahead. Or if you want to finish your shift, you can go home.

Bartley looks to the window and the THUNDERING rain beyond.

He does not want to venture out into the fierce storm.

Bartley stands up and stretches his thick, muscular limbs.

He walks over to Mabelle.

BARTLEY
Hey Mabelle.

MABELLE
(not looking up from her book)
Hello Deputy.

BARTLEY
That a good book you got there?

MABELLE
You wouldn't like it.

BARTLEY
Would you mind reading it aloud while I'm stuck here?

MABELLE
You don't know how to read?

Pickman looks up from his newspaper, a grin on his face.

BARTLEY
I can read, I just prefer bein' read to is all. Like my momma used to do when I was little.

MABELLE
What's this say, then?

Mabelle holds up the book right in front of Bartley's face.

BARTLEY
The Weird Black Mask from the Golden Ziggurat of Nango-to.

Pickman CLAPS twice, loudly. Mabelle nods.

PICKMAN
I wouldn't mind bein' read to myself, that is if Cooperson don't object.

COOPERSON
(humorlessly)
I can ignore her.

BARTLEY
Would you start from the beginin' please?

Mabelle puts a marker in the page she is currently on and then flips back to the beginning of the book.

MABELLE
I've never done this- exceptin' for my niece- so I hope I do alright.

BARTLEY
I'm sure you'll do fine Mabelle. You got such a pretty voice and all.

Mabelle blushes. Bartley sits on a stool beside the counter and rests the square chin of his square head upon the knuckles of his thick, interlaced fingers. Pickman walks over and sits upon the stool beside Bartley.

MABELLE
Well, let me start.
(reading)
'In the deepest reaches of the unknown Orient, far beyond the jutting peaks of The Wing-ho Mountains and Shan's Jungle of Warrior Destiny, lies the Golden Ziggurat of Nango-to. The opulent splendor of the edifice corruscates-

Bartley raises his hand. Mabelle looks up from the book.

MABELLE
(continuing)
It means sparkles.

Bartley puts his hand down.

MABELLE
(continuing; reading)
The opulent splendor of the edifice corruscates beneath the sun's rays, but the golden light of heaven is never admitted within the Ziggurat itself. Deep in the heart of the many-tiered structure, Oriental mystics practice the dark arcane arts of the sect of the Weird Black Mask. Any western man captured in Nango to is brought to the Ziggurat and emerges from it changed into something other than he was, something perhaps that should not be...'

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION RECREATION ROOM - SAME

The room has three tall glass windows, their views entirely obscured by the ROARING rain. The walls are hung with tapestries and the floor is covered with three bear rugs and two oriental-patterned rigs.

Alicia Binfrey and Valerie Pickman sit in divans facing each other. A phonograph sits in between the two women; the cylinder in the machine's center rotates and a heavy needle brings forth music from the deep grooves. The sound of a man SINGING an opera aria- accompanied by the POPS and CRACKLES of the cylinder- fills the room.

Valerie stares at the phonograph as if it were an animal or a small child- a thing of endless fascination. Alicia bemusedly watches her.

Valerie sips from her glass of white wine. Alicia leans forward on her divan and opens the small doors in the housing of the phonograph, located directly beneath the rotating cylinder. As the doors open, the SINGING and POPPING and CRACKLING get louder.

VALERIE
What a clever device Miss Binfrey.

Alicia opens the doors a little more and the SINGING increases its volume a little more.

ALICIA
Italy is such a wonderful country. The music, the food, the wine...it is too bad that the men- though handsome- are utterly lacking in a sense of propriety.

VALERIE
I've heard that they paw at anything which gives milk and walks upright, Miss Binfrey.

Alicia is a bit irked by the comment.

ALICIA
Well I certainly received a lot of attention...though the same cannot be said for the more common ladies.

Valerie suppresses a smile.

VALERIE
Yes Miss Binfrey.

Alicia is not quite sure if she is being mocked.

VALERIE
(continuing)
What is this aria about Miss Binfrey?

ALICIA
The character's name is Giuseppo and he has fallen in love with a woman who is married to a wealthy older man, but the wealthy older is dying, and so a priest is called in to hear his last words. But it turns out that the priest is the wealthy older man's long lost brother and that the wealthy older man's wife is the priest's illegitimate half-gypsy child, raised by a French baker. The aria is sung by Giuseppo to the French baker.

VALERIE
So the old man married his own half-gypsy niece?

Alicia, sipping her wine, nods.

VALERIE
(continuing)
The stories in these things are so-

BLAM.

The phonograph flies off of the table and CRASHES to the floor.

The startled women look over at the doorway.

The Poncho-cloaked Intruder stands in the room, his smoking pistol pointed towards them.

Valerie bites her lower lip and clenches her fists; Alicia pales with fear.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
Both of you stand up.

Valerie stands up. Alicia stands up.

The two women stare at the Intruder; his face is hidden in the shadows of his dripping wet, shining black poncho. The rain ROARS outside.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
Alicia Binfrey walk over and stand next to your guest.

Alicia walks over to stand beside Valerie. The Intruder walks towards the women, gun held forward.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
Disrobe.

Valerie looks at the man in horror; Alicia shakes her head 'no'. The Intruder CRACKS Alicia in the face with the butt of his pistol. She CRIES and falls backwards, onto the divan.

The Intruder, keeping his gun on Valerie, grabs Alicia by the neck and stands her upright.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
Disrobe.

Valerie begins to unbutton the front of her dress. Alicia, her cheek swollen and red, nods acquiescently. She begins to unravel the complicated strap that winds around her dress.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing; to Alicia)
Turn around.

Alicia, pale and tremulous, eyes filled with tears, turns around.

A knife emerges from the poncho, firmly gripped in the Intruder's left hand. The Intruder SLASHES the straps on the back of Alicia dress. The dress sags forward. Blood begins pool on Alicia's bare back.

ALICIA
You cut me!

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
Turn around.

Alicia turns around to face the Intruder.

Valerie's blue dress falls to the floor, revealing her beige slip beneath. She clenches her fists and grits her teeth in an effort to suppress her fear. Alicia's silk dress puddles like water around her slippered feet. She wears only a black brassiere and underpants.

The Intruder points his pistol into Valerie's face. He rests the tip of his knife in between Alicia's breasts.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
Everything.

Valerie's shoulders tremble visibly and her breathing becomes rapid and erratic. She raises her slip over her head, revealing her white brassiere and underpants. Alicia unfastens her brassiere and drops it on the divan. Valerie unfastens her brassiere and lets it fall away. Alicia puts her finger to the lip of her underpants, but then turns and runs.

The Intruder takes his pistol from Valerie's face and points it at Alicia. BLAM.

A bullet opens up Alicia's right thigh, sending her to the ground. She cries out in agony. Valerie starts to quietly cry.

The Intruder walks over to the prostrated mistress of the house. She grips her bleeding right thigh, hysterically SOBBING. The Intruder raises the heel his boot over her left shin and brings it down upon the bone with a sickening CRACK.

Alicia SHRIEKS. He stomps down a second time. CRACK.

Alicia's SHRIEKING sounds inhuman.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
Stay put.

The Intruder turns to face Valerie; she is nude. She covers her breasts and pubic region with her arms and hands.

PONCHO-CLOAKED INTRUDER
(continuing)
My name is Jordan.

Jordan pulls back the hood from his head to reveal his face.

Valerie involuntarily takes a step back and falls onto the divan behind her.

Jordan's bald head and neck are covered with numerous scratch marks mostly old scars, though there are a few scabs and a few fresh wounds. His left eye is milky and gray. His nose is partially collapsed. His lips are swollen with giant purplish-red cankers.

VALERIE
Please...please don't...

Valerie, seated on the divan, shuts her eyes.

JORDAN
Look at me or I start cutting off your fingers.

Valerie looks up at his scratched, canker-swollen face.

Jordan's knife hand disappears beneath his shining, dripping poncho. He keeps his gun trained on Valerie. Behind him,

Alicia MOANS and SOBS hysterically, sprawled on the floor--one leg bleeding the other broken into an obtuse angle.

Jordan stands in front of Valerie, his gun pointed at her.

He leans down and kisses her mouth with his own purplish, pustulated lips. Valerie shakes in rage and disgust, but tries to remain as still as possible.

Jordan leans back and lifts his poncho, exposing his phallus.

JORDAN
(continuing)
It is a bit corroded, but it still functions well enough.

Valerie vomits.

Jordan climbs on top of Valerie. She struggles beneath him and starts to SHRIEK.

JORDAN
(continuing; nodding

APPROVAL)
Scream. Squirm and scream.

Valerie stops screaming and stops struggling; she turns her head away and ties to detach herself from the coming horror...

Alicia's MOANS begins anew.

Valerie silently and repeatedly mouths the word 'no' as Jordan forces himself between her legs.

VALERIE
(whispering)
Oh god, Roger. Oh god.

FADE OUT:

FADE IN:

INT. WALTER'S WORK ROOM - SAME

Walter, the diminutive dollmaker, sits at a table in the center of his work room. Pieces of raw wood, spools of multi-colored yarn, various tiny ceramic eyeballs and at least a hundred carving implements lie on the massive work table.

Walter's HUMMING is barely audible amidst the ROAR of the storm outside; he has a slender paint brush in his hand and is painting the elaborate headdress of a Native American War Chief doll.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
That is a fine looking Indian, and I know of what I speak.

Walter looks to the open doorway; a poncho-covered Man stands just beyond it, in the hall.

WALTER
Is it...?

Billy Lee steps from the shadows.

BILLY LEE
It is I.

Walter smiles. He rests the doll upon the table and scampers over to Billy Lee. Billy Lee discards his poncho, hanging it on the doorknob to the workroom and hunches over, his arms extended to greet Walter.

The two men hug.

Billy Lee stands back and looks down at Walter; Walter looks up at Billy Lee, wearing his fine- albeit soaked-gray suit.

WALTER
You picked some very inclement weather to travel in.

Billy Lee nods.

BILLY LEE
Adverse weather is fitting for people with an adverse dispositions, is it not?

Billy Lee looks at the dolls that line the shelves of the walls. He sees one of a tall, blonde-haired man wearing a gray suit and carrying a gun in either hand.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
Is that a miniature replica of me?

Billy Lee walks over to the shelf and looks at the doll.

WALTER
It is exactly that. I also did one of mom and one of dad, but they were purchased by a traveling salesmen.

Billy Lee turns back to face Walter.

BILLY LEE
Did that lady come around on you yet- the one with the Saloon?

WALTER
Sindy? Not just yet. She is intimidated by my intelligence.

Walter wants to change the subject.

WALTER
(continuing)
Why do you venture this way, presently?

BILLY LEE
We did it, Wally Lee.

Walter's eyes widen; he smiles.

WALTER
Tonight? In the storm? What a wonderful opportunity, what a brilliant conceit! Was I correct? Did you find safes or precious stones in the houses I informed you of?

BILLY LEE
Every single one brother, every single one.

Walter's smile grows luminous.

A moment later, a look of concern flashes upon his face.

WALTER
You did not have to...to injure anyone did you, during your burgling?

Billy Lee looks at his brother's worried face.

BILLY LEE
Aside from some gentle coercions, no. The people in this town are cowed by the mere sight of a gun.

Walter nods his head, not entirely convinced by Billy Lee's words, yet wanting to believe them just the same.

WALTER
Good.

BILLY LEE
Presently though, I need to ride out-- my rendezvous time draws nigh. I cannot risk being nearby when one of the robbed gentlemen frees himself from his bonds.

Walter is disappointed.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
May I abscond with that miniature replica of me?

Walter brightens at the thought and scrambles over to pull it off of the shelf and hand it to him.

Billy Lee gently places the doll in his suit pocket and hunches over to hug his brother.

BILLY LEE
(continuing)
I will write to you soon Wally Lee.

Tears sparkle in Walter's eyes and Billy Lee grows a bit melancholic.

The two men hug.

Billy Lee leaves, snagging his poncho on the way out.

EXT. WALTER'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Billy Lee, wearing his poncho, steps from Walter's yellow, one-storey house into the ROARING deluge. He looks around him: the opaque rain falls in thick sheets, occluding his surroundings. From a pocket beneath his poncho he withdraws his compass. He looks at it in the dim light emanating from

Walter's house.

A BLACK SHAPE emerges from the rain and descends upon him.

Two pale white hands grab Billy Lee's throat.

Abraham Weiss and Billy Lee tumble to the ground, SPLASHING in the water, SPLATTERING mud pell-mell. Abraham sits atop his adversary, his strong fingers digging into the ropy sinews of Billy Lee's neck.

Billy Lee punches his assailant in the stomach. Abraham does not react; his face is a mask of calm hatred. He squeezes Billy Lee's neck, tighter. Billy Lee begins to choke, his face goes red. Billy Lee reaches for his pistol and withdraws it.

Before Billy Lee can point the gun, Abraham purposefully collapses forward on top of the weapon and his pinned foe.

The gun is sandwiched flatly between the two men's chests.

Their faces are only inches apart.

Abraham has not let go of his opponent's neck; he continues to dig his fingers in. Billy Lee's face darkens further; falling rainwater pools in his open mouth.

He COUGHS and GURGLES and struggles futilely. Billy Lee attempts to pull the sideways-wedged gun out from between their chests, but the revolver is too tangled in their wet clothing to extract.

Billy Lee starts to loose consciousness. He squeezes the trigger of the gun that lay flush between the two men.

BLAM. BLAM. BLAM.

Abraham jumps off of his pinned opponent.

Billy Lee CRIES out in agony.

Billy Lee's poncho is torn open, his chest burned and scored by the gun's discharge. Blood begins to pool in the diagonal trenches across his skin.

Abraham's black jacket and vest are shredded; his chest beneath is torn open and bleeding profusely. One of the shots punctured his left forearm. Abraham sees something on the ground nearby and snatches it up.

Billy Lee, COUGHING and GASPING, weakly raises his pistol.

Abraham turns to flee into the obscurity of the storm.

By the time Billy Lee is able to raise the pistol, Abraham has been absorbed the by the night and the rain.

GRUNTING in pain and still GASPING for air, Billy Lee stands up, the storm pressing heavily upon him. Gun in hand, he flees into the anonymity the storm proffers.

EXT. HOTEL RUDDINGTON - SIX THIRTY IN THE MORNING

The rain has stopped. Sunlight shines upon the facade of the hotel.

INT. HOTEL RUDDINGTON - SAME

Sheriff Pickman lies asleep on one of the sofas, Deputy Cooperson on another.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Where's the Sheriff, where's the Sheriff!?!

Sheriff Pickman and Deputy Cooperson continue to sleep.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Fire that thing into the air- that'll fetch him!

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Stand back.

KABOOM! Pickman and Cooperson are immediately awake.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
One more time.

KABOOM!

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Sheriff Pickman!

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Sheriff Pickman!

Pickman and Cooperson are on their feet; the men draw their revolvers as they run to the front door of the hotel.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman and Cooperson careen up the avenue, towards an elderly COUPLE. The man holds a smoking double-barrelled shotgun.

PICKMAN
Put that down, immediately!

The Old Man complies, resting the shotgun on the wet ground.

OLD MAN
Somebody murdered the McDonellys.

Pickman's eyes widen as he races towards the Elderly Couple.

Cooperson's eyes flicker in all directions. Somebody SCREAMS in the distance.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Sheriff! Sheriff!

Pickman looks at Cooperson.

PICKMAN
Get the other deputies.

Cooperson NODS and SPLASHES away, up the avenue.

In the distance a young girl SPLASHES down the avenue, passing Cooperson, headed towards Pickman. She is SOBBING.

GIRL
Sheriff, Sheriff, Sheriff!
(gasp)
The Tylors are dead, somebody killed the Tylors!

Pickman's stomach sinks. In the distance someone begins to WAIL.

Pickman jogs up the avenue, towards the running Girl. She falls into the water and mud of the ruined avenue with a SPLAT.

Pickman hurries to her and lifts her up, his eyes furtively scanning the street.

The Girl convulses in his arms.

GIRL
(continuing)
And the barber...
(gasp)
...the barber got killed too...
(gasp)
...shot his hand off and his...his face.

PICKMAN
Ermine?

The Girl nods.

Pickman stands up.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
You're Annie Dunforth's little girl?

The Girl nods.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Where's you momma at?

GIRL
She never come home last night.

Pickman's stares at the Girl in horror.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
The Sheriff's at the Ruddington!

Pickman turns around to the Elderly Couple and addresses them.

PICKMAN
Watch over little Miss Dunforth until things settle down.

Pickman runs up the avenue.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Val...oh god please...Val...

Pickman falls into the mud with a SPLAT, dropping his pistol.

He gets back to his feet, picks up the gun, shoves it into his holster and runs as hard as he ever has in his entire life, SPLASHING water in all directions and soaking himself within seconds.

In the distance somebody SHRIEKS.

Pickman's feet SPLAT and SPLASH on the soaked avenue. He does not slow his pace even though he can barely breathe.

EXT. PICKMAN'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman runs towards his house. Somewhere nearby a person MOANS.

Pickman runs up to the front porch, beneath the dripping overhang. A sheet of paper is fastened to the door.

PICKMAN
Oh god.

Pickman bounds up the stairs and reads the note:

'Roger, I am going over to Alicia Binfrey's for the evening. She is a bit of a snob, but I really want to see and listen to her phonograph. I should be back by ten o'clock. If you're lucky, I might be a little drunk.

LOVE YOU, VAL'
He opens the door and sticks his head in.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Valerie? You home kitten?

There is no response. Pickman pulls the note from the door, shoves it in his jacket pocket and races down the porch. He looks terrified.

He races up the suburban road, GASPING for breath and COUGHING, but not slowing at all.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
Somebody killed Dugan! The mayor's assistant is dead!

Pickman runs, numb to the horrors around him, only one thing...one desperate hope...in his mind.

A Hysterical Boy comes running at the Sheriff.

HYSTERICAL BOY
Sheriff!

Pickman races right past the child.

PICKMAN
(muttering)
Please be alright kitten...

Pickman runs and runs and runs, his boots SPLASHING water and SPLATTERING mud; he COUGHS and WHEEZES but does not relent.

EXT. ALICIA BINFREY'S MANSION - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman runs towards the colored-pebble driveway, past the flooded and ruined flower garden. He looks at the front entrance to the mansion. The door is ajar.

PICKMAN
No.

Pickman's boots CRUNCH upon the colored pebbles of the front path; his gasping beeline brings him closer to the entrance.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
No.

He ascends the stairs and enters the house.

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION GREETING AREA - SAME

Pickman enters the marble-floored, mirror-adorned enclosure.

Ralph the butler lies dead, sprawled upon the floor, a black hole where his left eye once was.

Drawing his gun, Pickman continues further into the house.

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION SITTING ROOM - SAME

Pickman quietly passes through the room; his sharp blue eyes, nestled deep within his leathery skin, scan the space. He sees nothing of interest.

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION RECREATION ROOM - SAME

Pickman enters the room. The first thing he sees is Alicia

Binfrey's body. The skin has been removed from her face--

her wide white eyes up stare up at him horribly from her exposed skull.

Pickman starts to shake. He looks further into the room. He sees the knocked over phonograph, and behind it the two divans. Valerie is curled up upon the further divan, nude and unmoving. Her eyes are wide open as is her mouth. Her head is twisted almost entirely backwards on her shoulders.

The blood drains from Pickman's face. Tears roll down his cheeks. He looks away from his wife, unable to endure the sight. He looks at the phonograph lying on the floor.

EXT. ALICIA BINFREY'S MANSION - SAME

BLAM. BLAM. BLAM.

BLAM. BLAM.

BLAM.

INT. THE BINFREY MANSION RECREATION ROOM - SAME

Pickman stares at the pieces of the phonograph he just blew apart. Smoke rises from the barrel of his gun.

He places his gun back in his holster, his hand shaking terribly.

Pickman looks over at his wife and his stomach sinks, as if seeing the tragedy for the very first time.

PICKMAN
Kitten...

He walks over to Valerie, tears stream from his eyes down his mud-splattered cheeks. He sits beside her.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Val.

Pickman rests his hand on her shoulder. Upon touching her, he begins to shiver uncontrollably. He exhales a horrible shuddering breath as he brushes the hair from her eyes. He shuts her eyelids with his coarse fingers. He closes her agonized mouth. He becomes nauseated but refuses to look away.

He gently turns her head forward.

Pickman shuts his eyes and presses his forehead into the splash of blond hair that runs down her back. He hugs her as tightly as he can.

EXT. ALICIA BINFREY'S MANSION - LATER

Pickman emerges from the mansion, carrying his wife's body.

He has clothed her in her blue dress.

MALE VOICE (O.S.)
The shots came from the Binfrey Mansion.

Pickman walks down the colored pebble path, cradling Valerie against his chest.

Deputy Bartley and DEPUTY JACKSON, and older able-bodied man with silver hair and an angular face, run towards the mansion. They have their guns drawn.

JACKSON
(to Bartley)
It's the Sheriff.

BARTLEY
Shots were reported-

Bartley sees who the Sheriff is carrying; he is horrified.

Deputy Jackson crosses himself. The Deputies run up the hill towards Pickman.

The Sheriff continues to descend the colored-pebble path, and the Deputies fall in beisde him, silent for a long, horrible moment.

Bartley rubs the tears from his square face with his thick fingers.

BARTLEY
(continuing)
Is there anything we can do?

JACKSON
Should I call a minister?

Pickman looks at Bartley and then at Jackson.

PICKMAN
Call an assembly at town hall.

One o'clock. At least one person from every single household must attend or the entire family risks bein' jailed.

Bartley nods, wiping tears from his eyes. Jackson nods.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Nobody leaves this town. Lock up anyone tryin' to get out. Find Abraham Weiss and lock him up. Send a telegram to Starfield about what happened here. Send another to Foxville asking for their top detectives. Get volunteers for a digging committee for those who...

Pickman's voice trails off. He inhales deeply and continues.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Get a digging committee for those who ain't got somebody left to bury 'em.

BARTLEY
Is there anything we can do for you?

Pickman shakes his head as he walks down the pebble path. He does not look at the deputies when he responds.

PICKMAN
No. I'll be at that meeting. I'll be there as soon as I've buried-

Pickman's voice CRACKS.

He clears his throat and continues.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I'll be there as soon as I've buried my wife beside my little girl.

EXT. RATTLEBORGE GRAVEYARD - NINE THIRTY

The young town's graveyard is small: less than one hundred people are buried within its confines. Pickman, shovel in hand, looks at a small tombstone upon which is written:

'Emily Lisa Pickman, Our Beloved Daughter.'

Next to the grave, lies Valerie's body, nestled in a plainly made coffin. Pickman plunges his shovel into the moist earth and starts digging.

INT. TOWN HALL - ONE O'CLOCK

The enormous enclosure is filled to capacity with at least six hundred distraught and agitated Rattleborge residents.

A podium with the name 'Rattleborge' written upon it stands in the middle of the dais at the front of the hall. Sunlight pours through the six windows at the top of the tall eastern wall.

Little clusters of people ARGUING, TALKING, WEEPING or WHISPERING are scattered throughout the assemblage. Fearful and teary eyes turn towards the central door as it CREAKS open.

Mayor Hogan, his face red from crying stands at the podium.

HOGAN
Before I speak and do what little I can to console you, let's take us a moment and bow our heads in prayer.

The townspeople of Rattleborge shut their eyes and bow their heads. Mayor Hogan looks down and at his pocket watch.

Engraved in its silver are the words:

'HOGAN,

To the beefiest bull in the Men's Club: Happy Sixtieth Birthday you old rascal.

YOUR PAL, DUGAN'

Hogan's eyes brim with tears. He pockets the timepiece and looks up at the crowd again.

Hogan wipes the tears and clears his throat.

HOGAN
(continuing)
Prior to coming here, I done spoke to Minister Darren. He'll hold three contiguos services tonight with the aid of Parson Howards- to accomodate those in need of spiritual support.

Sheriff Pickman walks through the doors; he has washed himself and put on a clean brown suit, a clean blue shirt and a pair of newly shined boots. He has cleaned his guns as well.

Silence flows like spilled ink over the assemblage.

Deputy Cooperson, Deputy Bartley and Deputy Jackson enter the hall a moment later. Jackson shuts the door behind them.

The four lawmen walk towards the platform, their heavy footsteps CRACK loudly against the polished wood floor; the reports echo like fading heartbeats in the enclosure's high rafters.

Mayor Hogan steps away from the podium. He nods solemnly to Pickman and pats his tenderly on his shoulder.

The wet, red and fearful eyes of the numerous attendees watch the Sheriff stand behind the podium. The Deputies stand beside the Sheriff.

Pickman looks forward, at the amassed townspeople before him.

PICKMAN
Sixty-three were murdered in Rattleborge last night.

Some WHISPERING and TALKING swells within the crowd.

Pickman waits for it to subside.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I do not make idle threats, as most of you already know.

Anger colors Pickman's face. He grips the sides of the podium, waiting for his rage to subside. Pickman exhales a hot breath through his nose and then coolly inhales through his mouth. He breathes out again- slowly- and clears his throat.

Cooperson, Bartley, Jackson, the Mayor and the crowd watch Pickman struggle with his anger and grief for a long, uncomfortable moment.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Somebody here knows something 'bout what happened. All of our wealthiest citizens were robbed and murdered by the foul men who came and went with the storm. Somebody who knows this town- and knows it thoroughly- aided these...these jackals.

Pickman surveys the crowd, as do Cooperson, Bartley and Jackson.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
If you know something or were somehow involved- accidentally or willingly- come to me before sundown tonight and come clean, and I'll deal with you squarely as a man bound by the law.

Again rage consumes Pickman; he waits for the internal tempest to pass before continuing.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
If I find out that you withheld information from me, I swear on the graves of my wife and my little girl, I will hand over my badge and I will cut out your tongue and nail it to the town sign.

The assembly is frozen by the Sheriff's words: for an instant nobody moves, nobody blinks.

PICKMAN
(continuing; nodding)
I will be on my front porch waitin' for you.

Pickman turns from the podium, walks off of the platform and leaves the hall.

Mayor Hogan exchanges worried glances with Deputy Cooperson.

Cooperson whispers into Bartley's ear and then runs after the Sheriff.

Buried deep within the crowd, Walter pales and begins to tremble. Cold sweat pours down the diminutive dollmaker's face.

EXT. TOWN JAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman walks towards the jail, flanked by Cooperson.

PICKMAN
How many volunteers we got for the diggin'?

COOPERSON
Far more than we need.

Pickman nods.

PICKMAN
Let's see if our suspect is conscious.

INT. TOWN JAIL, RECEIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman and Cooperson walk into the stone-walled buiding.

The guard, a stocky woman of fifty named GERTRUDE, sits behind the front desk, beside the door leading to the cells.

PICKMAN
He wake up yet?

GERTRUDE
I think so-- I heard some moanin' and some kinda talkin' in another language: babblin' and whatnot. And that colored fella is hungry.

Pickman pulls a key from his vest, inserts it into the lock and twists it.

INT. TOWN JAIL, HOLDING CELLS - MOMENTS LATER

Ten jail cells fill the space, each with a small wooden stool, a cot and a metal bucket. In one cell sits Mango, the piano player. He stands up as Pickman and Cooperson enter.

In another cell lies an Elderly Man, asleep. In another cell lies a Native American with his arm over his eyes.

In the furthest cell- distant from the others- is Abraham Weiss. His chest and left forearm have been bandaged. He sits on the small wooden stool, staring at the floor.

Pickman and Cooperson walk towards Abraham.

MANGO
Why am I in here, Sheriff? I didn't have nothin' to do with them killings'. You just lock up colored folk with no-

Pickman turns to face Mango.

PICKMAN
Like the other men in here- two of whom are white- you're a stranger in town at the time of the killings. Until I know more, bein' a stranger makes you a suspect. So if you'll-

ABRAHAM
These men are innocent, as am I.

Pickman, irked at being interrupted, turns his head to Abraham. The Sheriff's eyes smolder; he walks in front of Abraham Weiss' cell.

PICKMAN
What do you know?

ABRAHAM
There were three of them, correct?

Pickman and Cooperson exchange glances but say nothing.

Abraham stands up from his chair and walks towards the bars.

Even though he is a bit unstable on his feet, his eyes never leave Pickman's.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
I know the name of their leader. I know how they knew which houses to rob. And I will divulge nothing unless you allow me to hunt them down and kill them with you.

Pickman surges against the bars and grabs Abraham by the throat. The Sheriff pulls the prisoner close to his face, so that their noses are practically touching. Pickman's eyes are like cold blue gems; his voice is strong and measured when he speaks.

PICKMAN
Don't interrupt me and do not dare put terms to me. You are my prisoner and right now you're the primary suspect in the worst crime perpetrated in the history of this state. You'll tell me what you know and you'll stipulate no conditions.

Abraham stares back, incurious, aloof.

ABRAHAM
While I was unconscious, did the doctor who sewed and bandaged me describe or perhaps show you the many ways in which I have been mutilated?

PICKMAN
He did. He showed me.

ABRAHAM
Those are self-inflicted wounds Sheriff. I did those things to myself with the surgical instruments I once healed people with.

Abraham shakes his head.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
No, Sheriff. There is nothing you can do that will intimidate me.
(MORE)

ABRAHAM (CONT'D)
There is no pain you can inflict upon me worse than the pain I inflict upon myself daily, as punishment.

Pickman loosens his grasp upon Abraham's collar.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
Release me Sheriff. Together we will find and kill these foul men.

Pickman's face reddens in frustration. He turns away from Abraham, unsure of how to proceed.

Cooperson looks at Abraham.

COOPERSON
Withholding evidence in a multiple homicide investigation is tantamount to being an accessory, Mister Weiss. You can be hanged for not complying in a case such as this.

ABRAHAM
If you wish to hang me, do so after I've aided you and exacted justice.

Pickman turns back to the bars and looks between them at Abraham. The Sheriff speaks slowly and with empathy.

PICKMAN
Did they kill your wife? Is that whose face is etched in those bullets?

Abraham walks back to his stool. He tilts his head down and stares at the floor, his eyes are dead and distant.

ABRAHAM
When I am in a dark room- punishing myself with my blades her spectre appears before me. During her visits, we talk to each other and remember happier times in the fatherland...or when we first came to this country. But always, just before she departs, she says, 'Why do the men who raped and killed me still live?'

Pickman bites his lower lip in an effort to suppress his own emotions. Cooperson looks at Abraham, unnerved by his revelation. Mango returns to his cot, worriedly looking towards Abraham.

Abraham sits like a statue upon the small chair.

Cooperson puts his hand on Pickman's shoulder.

COOPERSON
We should go, Sheriff.

PICKMAN
(to Cooperson)
Wait.
(to Abraham)
You'd let these brigands kill again- murder other innocents- if you couldn't kill 'em yourself?

ABRAHAM
I would. It is for my wife, you understand...I must kill them for her.

Pickman, his eyes distant, nods. Cooperson and Pickman leave.

INT. WALTER'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Walter, pale and terrified, looks out of the front window of his living room, towards the street. Sheriff Pickman and Deputy Cooperson walk past. Walter holds his breath.

EXT. PICKMAN'S HOUSE - TWILIGHT

Pickman sits in a rocking chair on his porch, staring at the sunset. In his laps lies the note that Valerie left for him.

Cooperson walks towards the house. He takes off his hat as he climbs the steps to the porch.

PICKMAN
Deputy.

COOPERSON
Sheriff.

Pickman folds the note and puts it in his vest pocket. He points to the rocking chair beside him. Cooperson nods and sits in it. The two men stare off at the setting sun.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Did anybody come to you with any new information?

PICKMAN
No. Lots of people come by and give me condolensces, but nobody said anythin' of any import. You?

COOPERSON
Phyllis Cranston says that she might have heard some men talking in the storm and Sindy Waterford says that she might have seen some men walking around in the rain.

PICKMAN
That's it?

Cooperson nods.

COOPERSON
How are you holding up?

PICKMAN
Not so good. Just thinkin' about finding the fellows who did this...and about her. Just those two things, back and forth, back and forth.

Pickman nods, affirming his own statement.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I've got a question for you.

COOPERSON
Yes?

PICKMAN
You're a man of God.

COOPERSON
I am.

PICKMAN
When I was on the hill this morning, diggin' my wife's grave, I saw a rainbow.

Pickman turns from the sunset and looks at Cooperson.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I'm buryin' my wife next to my five year old girl...and in the sky is the prettiest rainbow I've ever seen. For the briefest moment- forgettin' that Val was dead- I wanted to show it to her. And then it hits me for the twentieth time that mornin' that she's gone. And still there's that rainbow hangin' up there smiling at me...mocking me as I'm diggin' a hole to bury my whole life in.

Pickman rubs his hands together and shakes his head.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
All I could think was that there's no order, no logic to anything-- no reason to what happens here on earth. Can you or your bible make some sense of this massacre?

COOPERSON
Violence is one of the stained hammers that comes with freewill, and it can be wielded by both the wicked and the righteous. Men are not controlled by the creator, merely made in His image.

PICKMAN
If there is a higher power, a watchful eye up there, what the hell was he doin' last night while this town was bein' slaughtered...and my wife was bein' violated? Why didn't he give us a sign or let us know what was happenin'?

Pickman's face colors with anger.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Where was your Lord then, Cooperson?

Cooperson does not respond; he stares sympathetically at Pickman, shaking his head.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Sorry...I don't mean to attack you, I know that you come out here to check up on me and I appreciate that.

COOPERSON
I do not want to preach to you Roger, I am here as your friend-- to listen and help you in any way that I can.

Pickman nods.

PICKMAN
I do appreciate that.

Pickman SLAPS Cooperson's knee and looks back at the sunset.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Ever since my girl died, I had a hard time believin'. You remember Emily don't you? Prettiest little girl there ever was.

Cooperson's face pales. His hands start to tremble. He nods.

COOPERSON
She was a beautiful little angel.

PICKMAN
When she passed on, Val and I stopped goin' to church. You see, our prayers weren't answered. But, after some rough years, we eventually found our way back to happiness...and we didn't need the roads of religion to lead us there. And at some point I started to wonder: were people happier before there were churches? In that time, I think if a man had a problem he fixed it himself, he didn't ask for some invisible power to fix it for him or forgive him for his transgressions. He figured out what needed doin' and then went and did it.

Pickman leans forward in his chair and looks at Cooperson.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I've made my decision Deputy. I can't give those brigands any more of a head start than I already have. Can you watch the town while I'm gone?

Cooperson's eyes widen. He nods.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Thank you.

Pickman give Cooperson his badge.

INT. TOWN JAIL, HOLDING CELLS - NIGHT

Carrying a two-buckle saddlebag, Pickman enters the holding cell area. A lone light bulb glares in the center of the space, throwing opaque shadows in all directions. Mango, the Elderly Man and the Native American male are all eating their suppers from metal plates. In his corner cell, Abraham sits on his stool staring at the floor. His food is untouched.

PICKMAN
Abraham Weiss.

Abraham tilts his head up. Pickman pulls a pair of handcuffs from his brown suit jacket.

EXT. SINDY'S SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

The lights are on within the saloon. Walter walks up the steps towards the establishment, holding a gift-wrapped oblong box. His eyes are distant and glazed like a starved dog's.

The box he carries is heavy.

EXT. TOWN JAIL - MOMENTS LATER

Two horses are tethered to the tieing pole just outside of the jail. The sound of a congregation SINGING GOSPEL wafts on the chilly night air. Pickman and Abraham exit the jail; Abraham is handcuffed.

Pickman unties the reins of the two brown steeds.

PICKMAN
Here.

He hands the reins of the smaller horse to Abraham. Abraham takes the reins.

The two men walk the horses down the avenue, out of the light spilling from the windows of the jail.

EXT. MCDONELLY'S FINE JEWELS AND THINGS - MOMENTS LATER

Illumined solely by the sliver of moon hanging in the sky, the two men lead their mounts before the closed jewelry store. Pickman looks at the sign and- remembering the proprietor- shakes his head. He walks over to Abraham and unlocks his handcuffs.

ABRAHAM
You will let me torture the one who savaged my wife in the manner of my choosing?

PICKMAN
Yes...but I get the other two. And you answer my questions as to how you know so much and wound up here.

ABRAHAM
Agreed. To find these men we need the dollmaker. He has not departed Rattleborge, I hope.

PICKMAN
Walter Lee Higginsford?

INT. SINDY'S SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

Walter, carrying the oblong box, walks inside the Saloon.

Two MEN sit at the bar: their faces are long with sorrow.

Empty glasses sit before them. Sindy stands behind the bar, drying recently washed whisky glasses with a tattered rag.

She does not see Walter.

The diminutive dollmaker makes his was to the bar. His hands, tremulous and white-knuckled, grip the big box.

He looks inside the spittoon: it is empty.

Walter places the oblong box upon the bar and clambers up upon the bar stool, down which his feet dangle like a child's.

Sindy turns around and sees him.

SINDY
I'm glad to see that you're alright Walter.

The dollmaker nervously nods. Sindy walks over and looks at him.

SINDY
(continuing)
Whiskey with fruit syrup and three cherries?

Walter, sweating profusely, nods.

SINDY
(continuing)
Take off your jacket if you're hot.

Walter nods again, but does not remove his jacket. Sindy turns away from him.

Walter nervously TAPS his fingers on the oblong box as Sindy mixes his drink. Sindy tuns back around.

She places the small amber drink beside the box.

SINDY
(continuing)
No charge.

Sindy turns around and walks away. Walter eyes the cherries floating in the drink. His fingers nervously TAP the lid of the box, in a continuous tattoo.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - SAME

Pickman and Abraham ride their horses down the avenue at a quick gallop.

PICKMAN
You go to his house, I'll check Sindy's. Don't cross me Abraham,

OR-

ABRAHAM
I will hold to our agreement, Sheriff.

Abraham yanks his reins hard, wincing as he strains his bullet-pierced left arm. He rides towards the suburbs.

Pickman SNAPS his reins. The Sheriff speeds his mount forward, down the avenue.

INT. SINDY'S SALOON - SAME

Walter unties the blue polka-dotted ribbon fastened around the oblong box and lets it fall to the bar. He picks up his small dark drink and swirls it gently. The cherries orbit the circumference of the glass like little red planets.

Walter drinks the entire glass and SLAMS it down, startling Sindy and the other two patrons. He chews the cherries twice and swallows.

WALTER
I would like another.

Walter runs his fingertips around the edge of the box's lid.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman's horse gallops down the avenue.

INT. SINDY'S SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

Sindy places another drink before Walter.

SINDY
Don't drink too much, alright?

Walter, irked by the comment, takes the drink in his hand and downs it in one violent motion.

EXT. SINDY'S SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman rides up before the Saloon. He hastily climbs off of his horse. A woman SCREAMS inside the bar.

Pickman draws his revolvers as he runs up the stairs.

INT. SINDY'S SALOON - SAME

Walter stands on his stool, pointing a double-barreled shotgun down at Sindy's chest. The saloon doors swing wide.

The Sheriff storms in.

Walter turns his head to the Sheriff.

WALTER
Drop your guns.

Pickman gauges Walter; he immediately assesses that the little man is volatile. He drops his silver-plated guns; they CLATTER onto the sawdust-covered floor.

WALTER
(continuing)

TAKE A SEAT SHERIFF, UNLESS YOU-

Sindy grabs the barrel of the shotgun, points it away from her and yanks.

KABOOM. The wall of bottles SHATTERS; their contents pour out as if a dam to a river of whiskey has just collapsed.

Walter falls from his stool and tumbles face first onto bar with a CRACK. Sindy wrenches the shotgun away from his grasping fingers.

Walter reaches beneath his blue suit jacket.

Pickman leans over and grabs one of his dropped pistols from the floor.

Walter withdraws a tiny two-shot handgun from his suit jacket and raises it.

Pickman levels his pistol at Walter. Sindy drops behind the bar. Walter plunges the tiny handgun into his own open mouth; he shuts his eyes.

BANG.

Walter CRIES out and grabs his shoulder, at the point where Pickman's bullet just pierced him.

Walter's pistol CLATTERS to the bar and then CLATTERS upon the ground. The two Patrons at the bar run out of the establishment. Pickman rushes Walter.

The dollmaker clasps his bleeding shoulder.

WALTER
(continuing)
You shot me!

Pickman grabs Walter by the collar and yanks him from the bar, hurling him to the floor. The little man SLAMS upon the ground.

PICKMAN
Get up.

Walter scrambles to his feet, his left hand clutching his bleeding right shoulder. Pickman shoves the barrel of his pistol into the nape of Walter's neck.

With his free hand, the Sheriff picks up his second pistol and holsters it.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Walk.

Walter walks forward, Pickman walking directly behind him like a giant shadow.

EXT. SINDY'S SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

Abraham sits atop his horse, standing beside Pickman's.

PICKMAN
(to Abraham)
He was about to kill the proprietor...or himself...or maybe me. Didn't have much luck.

Abraham looks at the little man.

ABRAHAM
How serious is his wound?

PICKMAN
Not very. Bullet got clean through-- only nicked his shoulder bone. Patch it up later when we're clear from town.

Abraham nods. Walter looks up at the black clad, strangely accented stranger. With and ungentle motion, Pickman handcuffs Walter.

WALTER
Owwww.

ABRAHAM
(to Pickman)
I need to retrieve my instruments from the Ruddington.

Pickman nods as he kneels next to Walter. The Sheriff handcuffs his prisoner's ankles together.

WALTER
Wait a-

Pickman pushes Walter's chest; the little man stumbles backwards, but the slack on the handcuffs fettering him makes it impossible for him to maintain his balance. He SPLATS on his back in the mud of the ruined road.

With the toe of his left boot, Pickman rolls Walter onto his stomach. Pickman ties a rope tightly around Walter's ankles.

WALTER
(continuing)
Wait a minute Sheriff!

Pickman wraps the rope around the cross strap at the back of his horse's saddle and secures it thoroughly.

Abraham reaches into his black jacket and extracts a small dark shape. He tosses the item to Pickman.

The Sheriff catches the tossed item and looks at it. In his hands he holds the doll of Billy Lee.

ABRAHAM
That is what Walter's brother looks like. He is the leader of the band that came here.

Pickman looks balefully at Walter.

WALTER
Sheriff, you can't do this...I didn't know he was gonna hurt anyone-- he said he wouldn't hurt anyone!

The Sheriff climbs into his saddle and SNAPS his reins. The horse GALLOPS forward. The loose rope wrapped around Walter's feet grows taught.

Walter, lying facedown in the muddy, rocky avenue is yanked forward, GURGLING and YELLING.

Abraham SNAPS his reins and follows.

EXT. TWENTY PACES OUT OF TOWN - THIRTY MINUTES LATER

Pickman pulls back on the reins, halting his horse. Abraham pulls up beside him.

They look at the dragged dollmaker, lethargically squirming in the grass behind Pickman's horse. Walter's face is a mask of mud and blood. He has lost two teeth, the tip of his nose and a portion of his left ear. He GROANS in dull agony.

PICKMAN
You gonna take us to your brother?

Walter spits something solid into the dry grass.

WALTER
I'm not sure...where...I'm not sure where he's gone to. Please Sheriff...please b-believe me...he didn't tell me where...

Walter starts to SOB again.

PICKMAN
But you know places he might turn up. A gal he fancies? A whorehouse he frequents? A place where he can unload the jewels he took from Rattleborge?

Walter continues SOBBING.

WALTER
I know where his...his wife and k-kids are.

Pickman, surprised by the dollmaker's words, looks over towards Abraham. The black-clothed doctor looks at the hanging sliver of moon up above.

PICKMAN
Where do his wife and kids live?

WALTER
Quarterstone.

PICKMAN
Quarterstone.

Pickman climbs out of his saddle and walks beside Walter.

The dollmaker shudders and shakes. He looks at Pickman and then away again, as if the sight physically hurts his eyes.

Pickman kneels beside the dollmaker and unravels the rope around his feet.

WALTER
You won't...you won't tell Billy Lee I helped you, will you?

PICKMAN
When I find him, there ain't gonna be much in the way of conversation.

EXT. HILLY REGION - MOMENTS BEFORE DAWN

Pickman and Abraham ride their horses eastwards. The horizon is a luminous royal blue, heralding the sun's imminent arrival. Across the back of Pickman's horse lies Walter, face down; his feet drape the horse's left flank and his arms and head drape the horse's right.

Walter MOANS.

Pickman watches a distant bird sketch elaborate circles against the sky.

Walter RETCHES, but his stomach is completely empty and has nothing left to yield.

WALTER
I'm dying, Sheriff...I'm dying...

Pickman and Abraham say nothing. The horses canter forward.

EXT. HILLY REGION - DAWN

Upon their horses, the three press on. Walter GRUNTS and MOANS with the horse's every movement.

PICKMAN
We can't have him moanin' when we're threadin' through the passes in this area.

ABRAHAM
I will tend to his injuries.

Pickman pulls on his reins, as does Abraham.

Abraham climbs down from his horse. He walks to the packs fastened to his steed's posterior and unfastens his thick black suitcase. He unbuckles the straps that hold it shut.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
How far is Quarterstone?

PICKMAN
Two and a half days' ride through Canhougache country and at least five if we take the safe passage around.

ABRAHAM
We are opting for the shorter route?

PICKMAN
We are.

Abraham nods and cracks open his bag. He withdraws a vial with powder and yellowish crystals that he then places in the pocket of his black jacket.

Walter MOANS and fruitlessly RETCHES again.

Abraham withdraws a vial containing a sepia-toned fluid and then a slender leather pack, ten inches long. He UNSNAPS the leather pack and from it, withdraws a glass syringe reinforced with steel wiring.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
What're you givin' him?

ABRAHAM
Morphine.

Abraham dissolves a few of the crystals inside the solution-filled vial.

Walter MOANS.

PICKMAN
That stuff'll quieten him?

ABRAHAM
It will quieten him.

Abraham places the vials back inside his black suitcase.

Upturned syringe in his left hand, Abraham walks over to Walter. He twists the dollmaker's arm around to get at an artery. Walter GROANS.

Abraham slides the long needle expertly into the soft underside of Walter's arm. He presses the plunger.

PICKMAN
Looks like you're givin' him quite a dose.

ABRAHAM
Addicts have no secrets.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - NOON

Atop their two horses, the three men ride eastward. Walter in unconscious. His face and his shoulder have been sewn up and bandaged.

PICKMAN
How'd you know? How did you know they'd be headed to Rattleborge?

Abraham, his wide black hat tilted very low over his face, glances at Pickman. Two black gems sparkle from within his shadow-obscured face.

ABRAHAM
When I returned to my wagon and found my wife dead and ravaged, there was a letter smoking in the campfire, not yet completely consumed. On it was the name Walter Lee Higginsford and his address in Rattleborge.

PICKMAN
That's it?

ABRAHAM
Yes.

The horses canter forward.

PICKMAN
How'd you know when they'd turn up?

ABRAHAM
I did not know when...or even if they ever would. It just happened that they arrived shortly after me.

PICKMAN
That seems to be the way of this world-- no reason for anythin'.

ABRAHAM
You have no religious faith?

PICKMAN
Not anymore. You?

ABRAHAM
I practiced Judaism once, but not since I saw how the faithful were rewarded. What the 'Chosen Ones' like my wife and I were chosen for.

Pickman eyes a few carrion birds whirling in the distance, quickly going nowhere. Abraham watches the creatures wind their invisible weft in the sky.

The two men ride silently for a moment, watching the birds.

The sound of horse hooves gently breaking dry grass whispers in the riders' ears.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
In the small hours of the night, my blades and my blood and my pain summon my wife back to me. That is my faith-- private and purposeful.

Pickman looks at the shadow-stained and scarred face of Abraham, and then looks away, wary. The two horses, with their three breathing burdens, canter eastward. The conversation has ended.

EXT. ROCKY TERRAIN - TWILIGHT

The horses gently pick their way across the sere, orange-hued terrain. Loose stones roll down the small hills, away from the steeds' hooves, like fleeing children. Pickman scans the horizon ahead, but sees nothing. Abraham looks west, seeing nothing but more rock.

Pickman looks south. In the very distance a small black speck glides across the rocky topography. Pickman shakes his head, dismayed.

Pickman turns in his saddle and opens up one of the saddlebags. He extracts two black pistols from the bag: the Steisselbachs. He pulls back on his reins and motions for Abraham to canter up beside him.

The doctor pulls up alongside the Pickman, where he receives his two Steisselbach pistols.

Abraham examines the guns. He SNAPS the front suspension lever down; the barrel swivels out into a loading position in one quick, automated motion. Abraham withdraws a bullet and looks at the etching he carved into it.

PICKMAN
She was a pretty woman.

Abraham nods.

ABRAHAM
She is.

He places the bullet back into the barrel and flips the suspension lever up; the barrel locks back into place with a CLICK.

PICKMAN
Don't fire that thing unless I do.

The Indians round here can be dealt with peaceably, though not always.

Abraham slides the pistols inside the empty holsters still at his waist.

EXT. CAVE MOUTH IN THE ROCKY REGION - NIGHT

Pickman rests a few twigs on the tiny fire he has made within the nestled and shielded cave. Beside him lay Walter, handcuffed, fettered and unconscious. Abraham, holding his black suitcase, stands at the cave mouth.

ABRAHAM
(whispering)
I will return later tonight.

Pickman looks at the Doctor and shakes his head.

PICKMAN
(whispering)
This ain't the kind of place in which to hack at yourself and mumble in the dark. Canhougache infest these parts.

ABRAHAM
(whispering)
The summoning ritual occurs only in pure darkness-- it will not draw the attention of the Canhougache.

Pickman sees that he is not going to dissuade Abraham. He tosses a couple more tiny twigs into the fire.

PICKMAN
(whispering)
Be careful and be quiet.

Abraham nods and departs, absorbed by the night.

Pickman leans back against the wall of the cave.

WALTER
(loudly)
The doctor is insane.

Pickman lunges at the dollmaker and presses the thick palm of his left hand to Walter's mouth.

PICKMAN
(whispered)
Unless you want to be Canhougache chow, keep quiet.

Walter's morphine-glazed eyes drift to Pickman. The dollmaker focuses his jumbled thoughts.

WALTER
(whispered)
The doctor...he is deceiving you, Sheriff. He used to run with my brother's band, years back...but Billy Lee thought he was too volatile...too unpredictable to involve in his extralegal endeavors. He is a treacherous-

PICKMAN
(whispered)
I may not know all them fancy words you know Higginsford, but I can smell bullshit the second a bull starts to squat. Lie to me again and I'll drag you all day tomorrow.

Walter wrinkles his bandaged nose and looks balefully at Pickman. The dollmaker shuts his eyes and lays his head upon the convex rock given to him for a pillow.

EXT. ROCKY VALLEY - LATE DAY

From a nearby defile, Pickman and Abraham ride their steeds into the open valley. The two brown horses are lathered and exhausted.

PICKMAN
We gotta rest 'em.

Pickman surveys the valley. Deeper in lies a small stream surrounded by a few ugly bushes and trees. Pickman points to the water. Abraham sees it and nods.

Both men climb off of their horses. They take the reins and lead their mounts to the water. Walter, flopped over the rear of Pickman's horse, MOANS weakly.

The horses dip their long necks and put their mouths into the cool water.

Pickman takes off his hat and dunks his face into the water.

He pulls his face out, wiping away the day's grime. He cups his hands, plunges them into the water, and lifts up a handful to drink.

Walter MOANS.

Abraham dips a small steel cup into the water and drinks from it. Pickman glances at the far rims of the valley they are in.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
We're too visible here. Once the horses've had enough, we gotta find another spot.

Abraham, holding his wire-reinforced glass syringe, walks up to Walter. He twists Walter's left arm around. Four purplish-red weals stand out from previous injections.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Don't kill him.

Abraham slides the needle in and presses the plunger. Walter

SIGHS.

ABRAHAM
(to Walter)
What is the name of Billy Lee's wife?

WALTER
Becky.

ABRAHAM
Where does she live?

WALTER
Quarterstone.

Abraham replaces the syringe in the narrow leather pack and SNAPS it shuts.

ABRAHAM
How old is Becky?

WALTER
Twenty-seven.

Abraham walks to the stream and dips his steel cup into the water.

ABRAHAM
What are the names of Becky's children?

WALTER
Regina, Thomas and Clarence.

ABRAHAM
How old is Thomas?

WALTER
Eight.

ABRAHAM
How many are in Billy Lee's band?

WALTER
Three. Billy Lee and the two he freed from prison: a fat man and a diseased rapist.

ABRAHAM
Open your mouth.

Walter does. Abraham pours the water into the sticky carmine hole that is the dollmaker's upturned, open mouth. Walter SPUTTERS and GURGLES and then swallows the liquid down.

PICKMAN
(to Abraham)
That's what he said this mornin' and last night, right?

ABRAHAM
Other than the wife's age- which last night he said was twenty-six- he says the same exact thing each time I question him.

PICKMAN
What he says is true then?

ABRAHAM
Very likely. It would take a person of incredible focus and resolve to lie while contending with such varying amounts of pain and narcotic. We should find Becky and her children Regina, Thomas and Clarence in Quarterstone.

Pickman scoops up more water and swallows it down. He exhales and then looks over at Abraham.

PICKMAN
We ain't gonna be killin' no women or kids, in case you're thinkin' along those lines, doctor.

Abraham walks back to his horse and puts his syringe case away.

ABRAHAM
We will not kill them.

Pickman looks into the shadows beneath Abraham's hat, but sees nothing.

PICKMAN
Or hurt them either.

Abraham climbs upon his horse, but does not respond.

EXT. NARROW DEFILE - END OF SUNSET

Atop the two steeds, the three men wind deeper into the jagged terrain. The last rays of the sun do not enter the defile they are in. The trio rides beneath the lit plateau, completely within heavy shadow.

EXT. NICHE - NIGHT

The horses are tethered outside a niche in a wide low pass; the steeds' heads hang low to the ground.

Walter, handcuffed and fettered, lies passed out, face first in the six-foot deep crack the men have chosen to camp in.

There is no fire or illumination of any kind within the niche. Pickman and Abraham stare up at the stars and the wisp of moon hanging in the black vault above them.

Pickman reaches into his vest and from its inner pocket withdraws a sealed envelope. He turns the parcel over with his coarse hands, the dim moonlight making it glow royal blue. Written upon the envelope are the words: 'Sheriff Roger Pickman's Bonus'

He turns the envelope over in his hands and looks at the wax seal: 'Mayor Hogan of Rattleborge'.

Pickman places the envelope back inside his vest.

EXT. STEEP, ROCKY SLOPE - DAWN

Pickman and Abraham lead their horses by the reins down the treacherous terrain. The horses pick carefully as they descend, carrying the packs and Walter. Loosened pebbles and stones roll ahead of declining assemblage, CLICKING and CRACKING as they spill down.

Pickman silently mutters curses with each loud noise the rolling stones cause.

They are two-thirds of the way down the hill when they see a NATIVE AMERICAN appear at the bottom.

Pickman turns and looks up the slope. A NATIVE AMERICAN stands at the top of the rise, looking directly at him.

PICKMAN
(whispered to Abraham)
There's one at the top too. Let's continue down and act friendly.

Abraham nods.

Pickman and the doctor continue to lead their horses down the slope.

TEN MORE NATIVE AMERICAN MEN and WOMEN emerge from the brush beside the bottom of the slope. Most of them carry spears, though few have bows.

Pickman shakes his head and curses silently.

PICKMAN
(continuing; whispered)
The marks look like Maccanoi-- they're rivals with the Canhougache.

ABRAHAM
(whispered)
Should we not take advantage of the superior range of our weapons?

Pickman looks at the top of the range. SIX MACCANOI stand atop it.

PICKMAN
(whispered)
No. We're pinned on an open and unstable surface. Let's hope we can treat with them.

The Maccanoi start to CHATTER in excited voices. The foremost Maccanoi points behind Abraham.

ABRAHAM
(whispered)
They want my horse.

PICKMAN
(whispered)
No. They want Walter. They think he is dead.

ABRAHAM
(whispered)
They wish to eat him?

PICKMAN
(whispered)
Yeah.

Pickman and Abraham are now only twenty feet uphill from the eleven Maccanoi Warriors.

The LEADER, a shirtless Maccanoi with black stripes painted

across his chest and green stripes across his face, points at Walter. The Leader then points to his own belly and the belly of a Woman standing beside him.

Pickman shakes his head, 'no'.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
He is still alive.

Pickman walks over and nudges Walter. Walter MOANS.

The Maccanoi Leader's eye widen. He turns around and addresses his brethren. The Maccanoi Leader turns back to Pickman.

MACCANOI LEADER
Hungry.

Abraham waves his hands.

ABRAHAM
(to the Maccanoi Leader)
Look.

All of the Maccanoi look at Abraham. He walks over to Walter.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
Look.

Abraham points to Walter's left leg and then to Walter's right leg. Abraham walks over to the Maccanoi Leader and points to his stomach and then to the stomachs of other Maccanoi.

The Maccanoi Leader nods and smiles.

MACCANOI LEADER
Yes.

Pickman's face goes pale. Sweat glistens on his forehead.

He turns and watches Abraham unbuckle his black suitcase.

The doctor withdraws a bone saw.

Pickman looks away.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - LATE DAY

Clear of the rocky terrain, Pickman and Abraham speed their horses along.

Walter is tied to the back of Pickman's horse. He has no legs. His remaining stumps are sewn, bandaged and bound tightly.

Walter's morphine-glazed eyes stare at the sun. He does not blink.

EXT. OPEN PLAINS - NIGHT

Pickman and Abraham sit around the campfire. Abraham eats a crust of bread smeared with lard. Pickman just stares into the fire, the blaze reflecting from a vast distance in his blue eyes. Walter, still handcuffed, stares up at the moon.

WALTER
(delirious)
I just...I just wanted to scare her...I only intended...to make her see...

Pickman glances back at Walter and then turns to the fire again.

WALTER
(continuing)
Sindy...I loved that woman...truly...I wasn't going to shoot her, you know...I just wanted to scare her...I only intended...

Abraham chews his bread, his black eyes flickering to Walter and then to Pickman.

ABRAHAM
Do you wish for me to quieten him?

Pickman's face flushes angrily. He looks at Abraham.

PICKMAN
We've already done enough to him. Let him ramble. There ain't no Indians out here.

WALTER
Billy Lee is going to shoot you...he will shoot you fine, fine gentlemen dead. And then I will go back to Rattleborge and marry Sindy.

Pickman stares into the fire, filled with self-loathing and doubt. He looks down at his folded hands. He watches the firelight play like sunlit waves upon his golden wedding band.

PICKMAN
(shaking his head)
Oh kitten...

Abraham extricates some small bones from a dried fish with a scalpel. He flings the bones into the fire and then offers one of the filets to Pickman.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Thank you, but I can't eat right now.

EXT. GRASSY PLAINS - DAWN

The horses carry their burdens and passengers towards the rising sun. Pickman and Abraham wear the brims of their hats low, hiding their eyes from the screaming morning light.

Walter stares blankly at the clouds above.

WALTER
My toes are cold.

EXT. GRASSY HILLS - LATE MORNING

Pickman and Abraham eye the huddled civilization looming on the horizon beyond the hills they ride in.

PICKMAN
That's Quarterstone.

ABRAHAM
Perhaps we should enter the town at night?

Pickman shakes his head.

PICKMAN
Anyone rides into Quarterstone at night must go before the Sheriff Dreighton or one of his men. During the day, things're more relaxed.

Abraham glances at and points to Walter on the back of Pickman's horse.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Yeah...we'd better gag and conceal him before we get any closer.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS OF QUARTERSTONE - AFTERNOON

Pickman and Abraham ride their horses towards the town.

Walter has been covered by a poncho, excepting his face which has been covered completely over with a small bale of hay.

It is impossible to tell that a person lies fastened to the back of Pickman's horse.

The riders come upon the town sign. It reads: 'Quarterstone, Population 2842.'

EXT. QUARTERSTONE CENTRAL AVENUE - LATE DAY

The storefronts on the central avenue are far more weathered than those in Rattleborge. The colors on the barber's pole are faded, the signs for 'Hanson's Creamery' and 'Chandler Shoppe' are sun-warped, and new wood intermingles with old in many decaying facades. The people walk with tight faces and purposeful gaits.

Pickman and Abraham ride their horses, directly behind a loudly CHUGGING and tremulous open car.

EXT. DENNIS AND DORIS' SALOON - MOMENTS LATER

Abraham stands beside the two rail-tethered horses, watching the passersby.

An aristocratic YOUNG WOMAN walks by the horses and SNIFFS.

She looks at the bundle of cloth and hay that hides Walter and then shakes her head derisively while flaring her nostrils.

YOUNG WOMAN
Wash those horses.

Abraham's eyes do not move beneath the heavy shadow of his black hat. She looks away and walks on, nose upturned.

INT. DENNIS AND DORIS' SALOON - SAME

The saloon is a wide wood-paneled space with a piano, a bar on either wall, four electric candelabra and thirty tables, half of which are occupied despite the early hour. DENNIS, a tall bald man of fifty stands behind the bar, threading pimentos into recently pitted olives. Beside him stands DORIS, a short amicable looking woman, slicing a lemon into nearly transparent circles with a sharp paring knife.

Pickman walks over to the bar.

PICKMAN
Good day to you folks.

Dennis successfully completes his coital endeavor and, resting the filled olive in a small wooden bowl with its peers, looks up at Pickman.

DENNIS
(a light Irish brogue)
And a good day to you to. New to town are you?

PICKMAN
I am, and unfortunately I am here deliverin' some bad tidings.

There has been a death in the Higginsford family.

Doris looks up from her lemon.

DORIS
We don't know the Higginsfords too well. They're a bit...uppity.

Billy Lee Higginsford only came in here once and he left almost immediately complainin' 'bout how we shouldn't be servin' red wine with ice.

DENNIS
(nodding)
Uppity fella, he is.

PICKMAN
Do you know where he and his family live?

DENNIS
No, but you can talk to Deputy Ricksby, he'll likely know.
(pointing over Pickman's shoulder)
Sittin' right there, he is.

PICKMAN
Thank you.

Pickman does not want to arouse suspicion by avoiding the Deputy, so he smiles and turns around.

He approaches DEPUTY RICKSBY, a pudgy man with very curly hair and small reddish eyes. The deputy is carving into the rough wooden table with a long, slender 'pig-sticker' knife.

Pickman weaves through the table towards the inebriated deputy.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Deputy Ricksby.

RICKSBY
Just Ricksby. I'm off duty.

The Deputy does not look up from the table into which he has carved 'Jessica is a w' with a pocket knife. He is currently making the lowercase 'w' into a bolder capital 'W'.

Ricksby looks up from his carving into Pickman's bright blue eyes.

RICKSBY
(continuing)
It's gonna say 'Jessica is a WHORE' when I'm finished.

PICKMAN
Kinda figured that.

RICKSBY
She walked out on me, with some twig of a fella with straight hair.

Ricksby looks back down at the table.

RICKSBY
(continuing)
What do you want?

PICKMAN
I have the unfortunate responsibility of bearin' some mighty bad news to the Higginsford family. Do you know where they live?

Ricksby starts carving the letter 'H' into the table.

RICKSBY
They live up on Silver Hill, a ways in on Valerie Drive.

Pickman blanches at the utterance of his wife's name.

PICKMAN
(tipping his hat)
Thank you for your help.

Pickman turns away from the besotted deputy and walks towards the saloon's front doors.

EXT. SILVER HILL - TWILIGHT

The grass in the suburban area is pale and reflects the twilight sun in an opalescent manner. The houses, each set upon a four acre lot, are pine green or light brown. Several of the wide two-storey houses have open-roofed cars parked in their curvilinear driveways. Pickman and Abraham ride up the slender road that cuts across the eerily luminous grass.

Pickman looks at the mailbox on the left. The name hanging from the horizontal post is Halleford. Abraham looks at the mailbox on the right. The name hanging from the horizontal post is Jacobs.

The dusty horses and dusty men continue up Valerie Drive.

ABRAHAM
(quietly)
Do you think the trio will still be together?

PICKMAN
(quietly)
Don't know.

ABRAHAM
(quietly)
If they have disbanded, we must not kill Billy Lee until we learn the whereabouts of his accomplices-- the rapist and the fat one.

Pickman nods in agreement.

ABRAHAM
(continuing; quietly)
It will be simple to extract any information we need from him with my drugs and tools.

Pickman shudders at the slight hint of pleasure he hears in Abraham's voice, but says nothing.

Pickman looks at the mailbox on the left. The name hanging from the horizontal post is Edmond.

Abraham looks at the mailbox on the right. The name hanging from the horizontal post is O'Hare.

PICKMAN
I meant what I said about his wife and kids. I will not abide violence being done to them.

Abraham does not respond.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I mean it.

Abraham looks over at Pickman.

ABRAHAM
If there is a point at which you can no longer stomach what must be done, you are free to return to Rattleborge.

PICKMAN
I ain't gonna debate this with you.

ABRAHAM
You are correct-- there is no point in debate. If you need to stop me from doing something, stop me. Otherwise, save your threats for a truant child or the town drunk.

PICKMAN
No threats, Abraham. You hurt them, I'll hurt you worse.

Pickman's blue eyes smolder within his creased, sun-weathered face. Abraham stares back at him for a long, breathless moment.

Both men look away, towards the mailboxes of the upcoming houses. Pickman looks at the mailbox on the left. The name hanging from the horizontal post is Yardman. Abraham looks at the mailbox on the right.

ABRAHAM
This is the house.

Pickman looks to the right.

The name hanging from the horizontal post is Higginsford.

Pickman looks at the house: it is a two-storey building painted pine green and is surrounded by a cream-colored picket fence.

Pickman looks at Abraham.

Abraham climbs off of his horse. Pickman climbs off of his horse.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

The two men lead their horses, past the open picket fence, up the driveway. The horses' hooves impact the pebbles in a tattoo of CRUNCHES. From deep within the house comes a child's voice.

BOY (O.S.)
Mother. Mother. Two men are coming up the drive. They have big horses and guns!

Pickman looks at Abraham, but the doctor does not return his gaze.

The front doors, shaped in the French style, open inwards.

BECKY HIGGINSFORD stands in the doorway, her rose-colored gown luminous in the setting sun. She is a tall woman in her late twenties with a pleasant smile, a narrow nose, a high forehead, curly auburn hair and kind eyes.

Pickman and Abraham remove their hats.

PICKMAN
Good evenin'. Are you Becky Higginsford?

BECKY
(heavy French accent)
I am.

A look of concern wrinkles her high forehead. THOMAS, a boy with curly blond hair, pokes his head in between the doorframe and Becky's skirt.

BECKY
(continuing)
Has something happened to my Billy Lee?

PICKMAN
He's not in then?

BECKY
No.

PICKMAN
I'm afraid that I have some bad news to relate...I'd prefer to speak to him on the matter.

Becky looks down at her inquisitive child.

BECKY
Thomas, go to your room and take your brother and sister.

Thomas nods and retreats behind his mother's skirt, which hides the boy as if it were a closing curtain.

Pickman and Abraham walk up to the patio.

BECKY
(continuing)
What is this bad news you bring?

PICKMAN
Perhaps I should wait until Mister Higginsford arrives.

BECKY
Please tell me.

PICKMAN
It's about Mister Higginsford's brother, Walter Lee.

Becky eyes open wide with concern; in an instant they brim with tears. Pickman walks onto the porch; Abraham takes the reins for both horses.

BECKY
Is he...unwell?

Becky wipes the nascent tears from her eyes.

PICKMAN
He has passed on, I'm afraid.

Becky shakes her head, shocked and speechless. She steps forward and hugs Pickman, pressing her flushed face into his dusty brown jacket.

Pickman raises his hand to pat her shoulder, but then decides against the consolatory gesture.

Abraham looks at the facade of the house, counting the windows and memorizing specifics.

Becky withdraws from Pickman.

BECKY
Billy Lee will be heartbroken...he has always been close with his brother-- they are fraternal twins.

Becky wipes her eyes clear and looks up at Pickman.

BECKY
(continuing)
Who are you men?

PICKMAN
I am Theodore, a friend of Walter's.

Becky's eyes flicker to Abraham.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
The man with me is a banker.
(MORE)

PICKMAN (CONT'D)
Unfortunately, Walter Lee Higginsford died owing a sizable sum to the bank.

Becky looks distastefully at Abraham.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Might you know when William Lee Higginsford will return?

Becky shakes her head.

BECKY
He was supposed to have returned yesterday, but sometimes his business has complications and keeps him away longer. You are welcome to stay here and await his arrival-- dinner is almost ready.

She eyes Abraham.

BECKY
(continuing)
Should I...

Pickman shakes his head 'no'.

PICKMAN
He has other business to attend to- including cleaning up those horses- and already has a room reserved at Hotel Mayweather.

Abraham nods, affirming Pickman's words.

Becky looks relieved.

ABRAHAM
(hiding his accent)
I will return tomorrow afternoon to see if Master Higginsford has returned.

Abraham leads the horses back up the pebble driveway.

Pickman climbs the porch stairs and enters the house.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Pickman, washed and wearing borrowed clothing, sits at the dinner table with Becky, Thomas, CLARENCE (a blond-haired boy of six) and REGINA (a miniature of her mother, aged nine).

Pickman, Becky and the childrens' eyes are shut; their foreheads pressed to their folded hands.

BECKY
And please welcome Wally Lee into your arms in heaven, Holy Father.

PICKMAN
Amen.

CHILDREN
(in unison)
Amen.

EXT. COPSE BESIDE THE HIGGINSFORD PROPERTY - SAME

Abraham has tied the horses to a thick birch tree inside the dense copse. Walter has been fastened to a separate tree, a cord wrapped around his neck and torso. The legless man is gagged and blindfolded. Walter's urine has stained the bark of the tree trunk between his legs.

Abraham currently watches the Higginsford house with a small, handheld telescope.

He sets the telescope down for a moment and kneels to the ground. He pokes his finger into the dirt, eliciting a small SQUEAK from some subterranean animal.

INT. GUEST ROOM - LATER

Pickman, wearing a gray bed robe over his undergarments, sits upright at the edge of a wide, soft spring mattress. The room has a bookshelf, a small electric table lamp and its own private bathroom.

There is a KNOCK on the closed door.

Pickman slides his right hand beneath his pillow.

PICKMAN
Yes?

BECKY (O.S.)
May I speak with you for a moment?

Pickman relaxes, but keeps his hand beneath the pillow.

PICKMAN
Come right in Mrs. Higginsford.

The door opens slowly, quietly.

Becky, wearing a silken camisole draped with a diaphanous robe, enters the room. She shuts the door gently behind her.

BECKY
Becky, please. Is there anything else you need?

Pickman eyes the woman warily.

PICKMAN
I'm fine, thank you.

Becky's face is flush. She looks at the ring upon Pickman's left hand.

BECKY
How long have you been married?

PICKMAN
Fifteen years come this August.

Becky nods her head.

There is an uncomfortable silence.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
How long have you and William Lee been together?

BECKY
Ten years. But he is away so often...ever since he started having his problem, not long after Clarence was born...

Becky looks down at her feet, which are bare: her toenails are painted red.

Pickman does not wish to hear any more.

PICKMAN
That's too bad. Maybe he should see a doctor.

Becky, not looking up from the ground, shrugs.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
I'm pretty beat Mrs. Higginsford--
I'd better turn in.

BECKY
(nodding)
Oui. Good night.

She briefly glances at the pillow, beneath which Pickman's right hand is thrust, and turns away. She opens the door, passes through and shuts it behind her, stealthy as a thieving cat.

Pickman slides his right hand out from beneath his pillow, walks over to the door and locks it.

EXT. SILVER HILL - DAWN

The pale grass shines like white fire with the bright clear light of the climbing sun.

Billy Lee, Rodney and Jordan ride up Valerie Drive, each man is atop a weary, dusty horse. Their saddlebags are indecently bloated.

Billy Lee wears his gray suit and gray hat; his chest is bandaged from his confrontation with Abraham. Rodney wears his drooping-rim blue hat and his yellow kerchief around his neck. Jordan still wears his black poncho, the hood drawn close to his face.

RODNEY
(to Billy Lee)
Lookin' forward to some screwin' with the little woman?

Billy Lee looks distastefully at Rodney.

BILLY LEE
Perhaps you should not speak every thought that comes to your mind...or perhaps you should simply refrain from speaking altogether.

RODNEY
I'm going to the whorehouse as soon as I'm cleaned up.
(to Jordan)
Wanna come with me?

Jordan's scarred, shadowy visage turns to Rodney for a moment.

JORDAN
Whores do not interest me.

RODNEY
I love 'em, with that perfume they spray on their neck and under their arms-- smellin' like some far off exotic land. And that soft, red, silky, shiny stuff they wear-- if you dress a dog up in one of them gowns, I'd wager he'd get hisself humped to death...and not just by dogs.

Rodney LAUGHS.

Billy Lee and Jordan ignore him.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

The three riders canter their steeds up to the pebble driveway of the Higginsford house.

BILLY LEE
You gentleman wait here.

JORDAN
I shall.

RODNEY
Don't take too long.

Billy Lee climbs off of his horse. He looks at his house for a moment. He stretches his arms up over his head and YAWNS.

Billy Lee leads his heavy horse up the pebble driveway, its hooves CRUNCH upon the white, brown, and beige pebbles, some of which burst into fine powder.

INT. DINING ROOM - SAME

Pickman, a napkin tucked into his borrowed gray linen shirt, dips a corner of his toast into a steaming cup of coffee.

Opposite him sits Becky. From outside comes a faint CRUNCHING sound.

Becky turns to glance at the window.

EXT. COPSE BESIDE THE HIGGINSFORD PROPERTY - SAME

Abraham finishes injecting morphine into Walter's left stump.

He places the steel-wired glass syringe back inside the slender leather case.

Abraham picks up the telescope from where it rests, nestled in between two branches.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

Rodney and Jordan sit atop their horses.

RODNEY
(whispered)
He's got a problem with his pecker, you know. I heard him one night he was talkin' in his sleep apologizing to his wife for not bein' able to do the job.

Jordan ignores Rodney.

Further up the drive, Billy Lee walks his horse towards the front porch. His eyes look to the upstairs windows. In the uppermost window, his son Thomas waves excitedly.

INT. THE BOYS' ROOM - SAME

The room is wallpapered with a pattern of snakes and lizards.

Thomas runs over from the window and shakes Clarence awake.

THOMAS
Father's home! Father's home!

INT. DINING ROOM - SAME

Becky walks over to the window.

BECKY
My husband is here.

Pickman lunges out of his chair and races out of the room, knocking a vase over as he beelines.

EXT. COPSE BESIDE THE HIGGINSFORD PROPERTY - SAME

Abraham tosses the telescope to the ground. He runs towards the edge of the copse.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

Billy Lee walks his horse up to the house. He looks away from the upstairs room. The pebbles CRUNCH beneath his boots and the horse's hooves.

Billy Lee's greenish-blue eyes swivel to the window on the first storey. His wife stands in the window, calling after someone within the house.

INT. STAIRS - SAME

Thomas and Clarence careen down the stairs, towards front door, a tumble of limbs and excited CHEERS.

INT. GUEST ROOM - SAME

Pickman runs into the room; he flings the pillows from the bed.

His guns are gone.

INT. DINING ROOM - SAME

Becky slides the window open.

BECKY
Billy Lee!

EXT. COPSE BESIDE THE HIGGINSFORD PROPERTY - SAME

Abraham emerges from the copse. He draws his pistols.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

RODNEY
Ever done an Oriental one?

Jordan, ignoring Rodney, stares at the Higginsford house.

JORDAN
Something is wrong.

The twin barrels of a shotgun emerge from beneath Jordan's poncho.

INT. FRONT HALL - SAME

The boys run to the front door. Thomas grabs the whorl-shaped handle to the left door and twists it.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

The doors swings open.

Thomas and Clarence run out of the house towards their father.

CLARENCE
Father!

THOMAS
Father!

Pickman, barehanded, comes running out behind them.

Billy Lee looks up from his children to the weathered fifty-six year old man running behind them, carrying a pool stick in his right hand. With a serpentine gesture Billy Lee withdraws the pistol on his right hip.

At the same time Abraham, emerging from the copse, trains his Steisselbach pistol on Billy Lee.

BANG.

INT. DINING ROOM - SAME

Becky SCREAMS.

EXT. HIGGINSFORD HOUSE - SAME

Billy Lee's right hand dangles tenuously from his wrist, exposing the white bone, yellow tissue and pink ligament within. Blood fills the wound.

Thomas and Clarence SHRIEK.

Pickman passes the terrified children and CRACKS Billy Lee across the left cheek with the fat end of the pool stick.

Billy Lee's left eye pools with purplish red fluid. Pickman swings the pool stick around for another blow, but Billy Lee lunges forward at him; they SLAM together and fall to the ground.

JORDAN
(to Rodney)
We've been ambushed.

Jordan SNAPS the reins of his horse and turns the animal away from the Higginsford property.

RODNEY
(to Jordan)
We gotta help him!

Jordan digs his spurs into the sides of his horse; the horse NEIGHS loudly and whirls for a moment.

Abraham, thirty feet away at the front of the house, points his Steisselbach at the head of Jordan's horse.

BANG. BANG. BANG. BANG.

The horse's head comes apart in thick gory gobs. The horse collapses forward and then on its side, with Jordan still mounted.

Rodney turns his own horse away, SNAPS his reins and digs his spurs in.

Becky runs out of the house, SCREAMING, SCREAMING, SCREAMING.

She is holding one of Pickman's pistols in her two upraised hands.

Pickman shoves Billy Lee down and then rams his elbow into Billy Lee's jaw. CRACK. He rams his elbow into Billy Lee's jaw a second time: Billy Lee's jaw buckles inward with a horrible CRUNCH.

Billy Lee withdraws his remaining gun with his left hand.

Pickman clamps his hand onto Billy Lee's revolver, clutching the hammer forward so that it cannot retract to fire.

Pickman stares into Billy Lee's eyes.

PICKMAN
You killed my-

Billy Lee twists the gun abruptly and squeezes the trigger.

BANG. Pickman GRUNTS as he takes a shot in the stomach.

Rodney rides his horse away from the fray. Abraham points his Steisselbach at Rodney's neck. BANG. Rodney's throat stretches and bursts, spitting a crimson streak into the blue morning sky.

Abraham runs towards Jordan; the rapist's left leg and poncho are pinned beneath his dead horse. While running, Abraham holsters his emptied pistol and withdraws his other.

Jordan crawls out from beneath the dead horse. Abraham points his Steisselbach at Jordan's left knee. BANG. Jordan HISSES and drops face first onto the road.

Pickman squeezes his bullet-pierced stomach as he kicks Billy Lee's hand, sending the gun off into the grass. Pickman kicks Billy Lee in the head. THUD. He kicks him again.

THUD. Billy Lee's eyes close as he loses consciousness.

Pickman kicks him again. CRACK. The left side of Billy Lee's head caves in and blood squirts from his right ear.

Holding Pickman's pistol with her two trembling hands, Becky SCREAMS and squeezes the trigger.

BANG.

Pickman CRIES OUT as he is blown forward by the impact of the bullet in his back. He lands face first in the grass. He twists his head.

Becky is standing over him, YELLING at him in French. She points the gun at him, her face a mask of fury covered with a sheen of tears.

Pickman turns away from her. He COUGHS and blood comes to his lips. He presses his face into the opalescent grass in final resignation.

PICKMAN
(continuing; muttering)
Val...

A shadow falls over Pickman, turning the opalescent grass black.

ABRAHAM
Mrs. Higginsford. Put down that gun or I will shoot you dead where you stand, right in front of your children.

Becky YELLS at the children in French; they run inside, SOBBING continuously.

Pickman lifts his head up from the grass, trailing threads of pink saliva and blood; he looks up at Abraham.

Abraham has his Steisselbach aimed at Becky.

Pickman shakes his head in horror; he struggles to his knees.

PICKMAN
No, no...Abraham, no...no...

Abraham levels his gun at Becky's head.

ABRAHAM
(to Becky)
Drop the gun or I will kill you.

BECKY
You murderers, you murderers! How dare-

BANG. Becky falls back, her forehead caved in by the bullet that impacted in its center.

From inside the house, the children SHRIEK.

Pickman's face goes scarlet with rage. He struggles to his feet and lunges for Abraham.

Abraham steps out of the way of Pickman's clumsy, pained attack.

Pickman's THUDS back down, onto the glowing grass; his scarlet face deepens to an almost violet hue.

ABRAHAM
Should I have let her shoot you again? Or possibly me?

Pickman COUGHS his answer, a crimson splatter upon the opalescent grass.

PICKMAN
You bastard...you evil, evil-

ABRAHAM
You should know by now that there is no good nor evil-- only animals with desires.

Abraham, holsters his pistol, turns away from Pickman and walks towards the road.

ABRAHAM
(continuing)
The most satisfied animals are the ones who do not deny the things that they crave.

Pickman struggles to his knees again, but collapses forward, GRUNTING deeply as the pain wrenches him.

He watches Abraham stand over Jordan who tries to crawl, regardless of his blown-out kneecap and broken leg.

Abraham raises his left hand in the air. The sun catches upon a piece of metal he holds aloft. He runs the metal along Jordan's poncho.

The black poncho drops to the road, revealing a pale, scarified and bruised man, covered with rashes and sores.

Pickman watches Abraham withdraw a gleaming metal hook.

Abraham pierces Jordan's quivering belly with the hook. Once through the skin- in then out- Abraham yanks the hook, pulling up the flesh it has snagged.

By the hook embedded in Jordan's pale, sore-speckled belly, Abraham drags his captive towards the copse.

Pickman exhales, his breath sounds like a TIDAL WAVE crashing upon the shore.

Abraham drags Jordan inside the dark copse.

Pickman rises to his hands and knees, wobbling like a sick, bleeding dog. He shuffles forward towards Billy Lee's pistol. He COUGHS, spattering pink saliva and tiny crimson globules on the white blades of grass.

Pickman grabs the pistol in his right hand and continues to crawl towards the copse. A low MOAN comes from within the cluster of trees.

Pickman crawls onward.

INT. COPSE BESIDE THE HIGGINSFORD PROPERTY - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman enters the copse. His eyelids flutter as he struggles to remain conscious; beads of sweat slide like glass slugs down his face.

A SHRIEK comes from further within the copse, momentarily reawakening him. Pickman COUGHS violently; blood sprays from his nostrils. He crawls further into the copse, the chiaroscuro absorbing him like a veil of insects.

Pickman looks up. A thicket of bushes lies directly before him. Upon the other side of the brush he sees a dark figure moving before a pale one. Pickman reaches out with his left hand and pushes aside the thorny thicket.

Jordan's nude body hangs upside down in the middle of a small clearing, his feet tied together, suspended by a rope, his hands bound behind his back. An emptied syringe is lodged in his scrotum. The two stomach punctures from Abraham's hook have been plugged with rocks. Jordan's canker-covered tongue hangs out of his mouth upon a white tendril of flesh, like a half-eaten sausage. A metal tube juts from between his ribs, air WHISTLING in and out with his shallow breathing.

Pickman gags and looks away. Jordan MOANS and writhes in horrible agony.

Pickman draws the hammer back on his pistol and tremulously trains it upon Jordan's agony-distended face. Abraham lunges from the shadows and kicks the gun from Pickman's hand.

Pickman reaches for the gun.

PICKMAN
(mumbling)
You...you goddam...jew bastard...

Abraham quickly snatches the pistol from the ground and flings it into the darkness. He then kicks Pickman in the back of his skull.

Pickman starts to pass out.

Abraham reaches beneath his black jacket and removes a silver mask. The features of the mask are molded to resemble Abraham's dead wife.

Pickman's eyes erratically roll back in his head as darkness takes him.

Abraham reaches into a pouch beneath his jacket and withdraws a pygmy mole by its little gray tail; the bucktoothed creature SQUEAKS.

PICKMAN
(continuing)
Goddam you...

Abraham lifts the pygmy mole to the WHISTLING metal tube that juts from Jordan's torso. The bucktoothed marsupial disappears into the metal tube, headed towards Jordan's left lung.

All is quiet in the copse for one horrible moment. Jordan then begins to spastically jerk upon the rope which suspends him upside down. He SHRIEKS; the sound he makes is utterly alien to humanity-- a sound like steel cutting through steel.

Abraham watches Jordan's suffering from behind the metal mask of his dead wife's face.

Pickman passes out.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

INT. QUARTERSTONE JAIL - NIGHT

Pickman, bandaged, pale and gaunt, lies in the jail cell, upon a tattered and stained mattress. The lone window in the cell is small and has rusted bars.

Pickman GROANS as he swims towards consciousness. He lifts his aching head and grimaces as pain shoots through his thickly-bandaged torso.

Plump, curly-haired Deputy Ricksby sits at the front desk, carving into the wood with his oversized pig-sticker knife.

He looks up at Pickman with baleful eyes, obliquely illumined by the kerosene lamp on his scored and denuded desk.

RICKSBY
You're awake.

Ricksby stands up and stretches; he flings the pig-sticker into the surface of his desk where it PINGS and wiggles like the tail of a happy dog. He walks to the door and pokes his head out.

RICKSBY
(continuing)
Todd. Get the Sheriff. He's awake.

MAN'S VOICE (O.S.)
Yes sir.

Pickman, his lips chapped and his as mouth dry as a sun-bleached canyon, rubs the detritus of a long sleep from his eyes and lips. He sits forward slowly, wincing as pain spreads like spilled ink throughout his body. He SNIFFS and grimaces at what he smells.

Ricksby turn around and faces Pickman.

RICKSBY
That was pretty deceptive, what you done. Askin' me about the Higginsfords and all. That was pretty low.

Ricksby plucks his knife from the table, the long blade PINGING as it vibrates in the air.

PICKMAN
Got any water?

RICKSBY
I got a bladder full o' the stuff if you want some.

The door at the front of the room opens. Filling the doorway stands SHERIFF DREIGHTON, a broad, huge mountain of a man with thick white hair and a bushy white mustache. His eyes look like two small black peppercorns; his left hand is shy two fingers. A stuffed bear's claw hangs on a leather twine around his neck.

Sheriff Dreighton briefly glances at Pickman and then racks his rifle on the wall.

RICKSBY
(continuing; to Dreighton)
He's awake.

DREIGHTON
I can see that.

Dreighton walks towards Pickman, each step a cruel CREAKING punishment to the worn floorboards beneath him.

Pickman stares at Dreighton. Dreighton spits into Pickman's cell, the expectoration landing with a SPLAT.

DREIGHTON
(continuing)
A mother and a father are dead-- murdered right in front of their own kids. Another two were found dead in the woods-- their bodies mutilated worse than any Canhougache could manage. How dare you a lawman bring such reckless violence to Quarterstone?

PICKMAN
Had your wife been raped and killed, you woulda done the same.

DREIGHTON
You're wrong Pickman. I'd not conspire with some evil torturer and allow an innocent woman to be killed before her children no matter what her husband done. I got kids--ain't nothin' more precious than their little souls. You've a daughter, don't you?

PICKMAN
She died.

DREIGHTON
And so will you for the foul things you done here.

Dreighton spits again into Pickman's cell. SPLAT. He turns away and walks towards the door, the floorboards protesting the massive man's weight with plaintive CREAKS. He reclaims his repeater rifle from the rack.

PICKMAN
Are the children alright?

Dreighton pauses but does not turn back to face Pickman. His peppercorn-like eyes almost disappear entirely within his wrathful face.

DREIGHTON
The children ain't alright. The girl has got the shocks and may not recover. She don't eat anythin' unless its poured down her throat.

Pickman looks at the ground, shaking his head remorsefully.

PICKMAN
Let me out of here, so I can get the fella that killed Mrs. Higginsford and bring him to justice.

DREIGHTON
You've confused justice and revenge--that's why you're gonna hang.

Pickman withdraws the envelope that contains his bonus--it is worn and stained brown, but still intact.

PICKMAN
If I could...I'd like to give my money to whoever is raising those kids.

Dreighton stares at the floor. For a long silent moment, he is as still as the mountain he resembles.

DREIGHTON
I better leave this place right now or I am liable to beat you to death for that remark.

Dreighton walks through the door, SLAMMING it behind him.

Ricksby walks over to the cell and runs his pig-sticker across the bars: CLACK, CLACK, CLACK.

RICKSBY
Now that you're awake they gonna try you and string you up quick as a gnat's fart. Your deputies can't save you neither.

Pickman looks up at Ricksby at the mention of the deputies.

RICKSBY
(continuing)
They tried takin' custody of you while you was unconscious, but Sheriff Dreighton sent them scuttlin' back to that fancy town o' yours.

Ricksby grins at the memory.

RICKSBY
(continuing)
Big words and lawyer talk ain't gonna oil your neck out of the noose, no sir. You gonna choke until you're purple and dead.

Ricksby nods in affirmation of himself, turns away and walks back to his desk.

INT. QUARTERSTONE JAIL - MIDNIGHT

Pickman lies in his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He hears a whispered VOICE from outside.

Something CLANGS against the bars and CLATTERS to the floor of the cell. Pickman sits up, each and every injury screaming for him to remain prostrate.

Deputy Ricksby, asleep at his desk, stirs.

RICKSBY
What's that racket about?

Pickman looks on the floor; he sees a pistol.

The front door to the prison opens. Deputy Cooperson and Deputy Bartley storm in, guns raised.

Ricksby scrambles for the gun rack, but Cooperson intervenes, proffering the two barrels of his blue-enameled, ivory-handled pistols.

COOPERSON
We are taking Sheriff Pickman.

Ricksby shakes his head in defiance.

RICKSBY
You ain't gonna shoot me.

Cooperson WHACKS him across the mouth with the butt of his pistol. Bartley rushes behind Ricksby and pulls a gag over his mouth; he then SNAPS handcuffs over Ricksby's wrists.

Cooperson looks at Pickman.

COOPERSON
Let's get you back home to Rattleborge.

EXT. QUARTERSTONE CENTRAL AVENUE - ONE IN THE MORNING

Pickman, supported by Cooperson and Bartley, struggles to remain upright.

The storefronts are dark and the slender greenish-blue moon yields very little light. The trio shuffles forward.

Pickman is in tremendous pain, but suppresses all of the whines and groans that would escape a weaker man.

COOPERSON
(whispered)
We hobbled some horses just beyond the town perimeter.

CLICK-CLACK.

Pickman, Cooperson and Bartley turn around.

Sheriff Dreighton stands behind them, flanked by Deputy Ricksby and DEPUTY TODD, a young hawk-nosed man. All three men hold repeater rifles.

DREIGHTON
I don't want to leave Rattleborge without no lawmen. Leave Pickman and I'll forget you two boys pulled this dumb stunt.

A jackal scampers across the street. Cooperson flinches.

Bartley flinches. Deputy Todd flinches. Deputy Ricksby flinches. Pickman and Sheriff Dreighton do not flinch.

The mountainous lawman stares at Cooperson with his small black peppercorn eyes.

DREIGHTON
(continuing)
Set him down and walk away.

PICKMAN
(to Cooperson)
Do it, Matthew. Nobody else needs to die.

COOPERSON
No, Roger.
(to Dreighton)
I will not let you lynch Pickman. He is a hero in Rattleborge and that town is in desperate need of some hope right about now. If you kill him, you'll take that glimmer away...

DREIGHTON
I ain't arguin' with you college boy. Put him down-- he'll have a trial for what he done.

COOPERSON
An eye for an eye was all he was after. I stand by the Lord's words.

BLAM. Cooperson's right shoulder opens up in a burst of crimson. With his left hand he draws his pistol and fires back at Dreighton. BANG. Dreighton's right arm whips back; his rifle flies into the air like a frightened bird.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
Stop this before-

Ricksby aims and fires. BLAM. Bartley takes a bullet in his neck and falls backward, air whistling through his rent windpipe. Cooperson's eyes widen as he watches Bartley collapse.

Pickman raises his gun. BANG. Ricksby takes a bullet in the stomach; he curls forward like a kitten around a ball of string.

Cooperson and Todd aim at each other and fire simultaneously.

BANG. BLAM. Todd's face caves in at his mouth, his jaw and teeth and gums crumbling inwards like stained glass.

Cooperson catches a second bullet in the chest.

Dreighton, disregarding his bleeding right arm, snags Ricksby's rifle with his left, three-fingered hand. He points it at Cooperson.

BANG. BANG. BANG. Dreighton stumbles backward as Pickman's shots pound into his massive torso. Dreighton's small dark eyes glint with the greenish-blue light of the moon for a brief moment; he falls backward, SLAMMING onto the dusty road.

Cooperson and Pickman look around; town residents hesitantly walk into the street.

WOMAN
Who got shot?

Cooperson and Pickman hobble towards an alleyway as the avenue fills with curious, confused PEOPLE.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - SAME

Cooperson and Pickman stumble into the alleyway. They totter beside a giant wooden garbage box filled with the rotting offal of a butcher's shop-- the flesh is speckled with buzzing flies. From the avenue nearby come SHOUTS and YELLS.

WOMAN (O.S.)
The Sheriff's been kilt! The Deputies is wounded.

Pickman sits beside Cooperson.

PICKMAN
How did we get on this side of the law?

Cooperson reaches beneath his jacket and pulls out his bible; he COUGHS, spattering the book with blood. He starts to wheeze.

COOPERSON
My left lung is collapsing.

Cooperson leans back against the hamper filled with rotting meat. Pickman shakes his head.

PICKMAN
What can I do?

COOPERSON
Hear my final confession...
(gasp)
...and take it to a priest for me.

Pickman nods, his eyes blurred with tears.

COOPERSON
(continuing)
When I was in Boston I did something...something terrible to a little girl named Mary LaPreggia.

Pickman sad eyes harden.

PICKMAN
What did you do?

Cooperson starts to cry. His shoulders shake as tears run down his face.

COOPERSON
I'm so so sorry...I couldn't help myself...that's why...that's why I got away and moved out here. I needed to see the northern lights.

Pickman looks coldly upon Cooperson.

PICKMAN
What did you do to her?

Cooperson COUGHS up blood; he shakes his head weakly back and forth denying his words...his past...

COOPERSON
I took her. I took her and I used her.

Pickman's hands squeezes the handle of his revolver; he trembles as rage surges through him.

PICKMAN
Twice when I went with Val to Colorado, I let you look after my little girl. I left her in your care.

Cooperson violently shakes his head back and forth.

COOPERSON
No Roger, I never transgressed again...not since Boston. I've given my life over to the Lord as penance, to try and make things right.

Pickman grits his teeth; the sinews in his forearms tighten; his fingers squeeze his pistol handle; his eyes turn into small black coals.

PICKMAN
But you looked at her...with those eyes. And you had those thoughts.

And with Jess Walker's girl too.

Cooperson nods his head.

COOPERSON
I did.

PICKMAN
Goddam you Matthew. Goddam you for telling me this.

EXT. QUARTERSTONE CENTRAL AVENUE - SAME

People are huddled around the bodies of Sheriff Dreighton and Deputy Todd. Deputy Ricksby, still alive, is being carried away by a group of four men.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

People in the street scatter in all directions.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - SAME

Pickman stands up. Three bulletholes smoke in the wooden box of rotting meat, just beside Cooperson's head.

Cooperson, shivering and sweating, looks up at Pickman.

COOPERSON
Please take my confession to a priest...I've tried my whole life to-

PICKMAN
Nope. I ain't gonna repeat what you said, nor am I gonna kill you. I'm gonna leave you in your Lord's hands...if He'll still touch you.

Pickman staggers out of the alleyway.

COOPERSON
Are you going to after Abraham?

Pickman looks back at Cooperson, bleeding, shivering, pitiful against the hamper of rotten meat.

PICKMAN
I'm done up with revenge, Cooperson.

Pickman staggers out of the alley.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

EXT. TWENTY PACES OUT OF TOWN - AFTERNOON

The sign for Rattleborge has been repainted.

"You are now entering Rattleborge: Location of the Rainy Night Massacre. Population: 1581"

Pickman rides his horse up to the sign; he and his mount are completely covered in sand and dust. Pickman looks as if he has been scorched and aged by his long ride in the open sun.

EXT. CENTRAL AVENUE - MOMENTS LATER

Pickman rides his horse up the street. He looks at the familiar storefronts, many of which are still dark.

He rides past Hotel Ruddington, Ermine's Barbershop, Cattlebrush's and McDonelly's Fine Jewels and Things.

A few people wave at him, but he just stares back at them, as if he has no idea what their gestures mean.

EXT. RATTLEBORGE GRAVEYARD - TWILIGHT

Pickman stands before two simple gravestones, upon which are chiselled the names Emily Lisa Pickman and Valerie Meredith Pickman.

Mayor Hogan, wearing a fine blue suit with white pinstripes, climbs out of his flatulent car and walks up the hill towards Pickman.

HOGAN
I'm supposin' you know that there's a bounty on your head over what happened back in Quarterstone.

Pickman nods.

HOGAN
(continuing)
Most people here think you're a hero for killin' those men.

PICKMAN
And you?

HOGAN
I think you left this town when we needed you and then behaved like a black jackal. You abandoned your people to slake your own bloodlust, you did. That ain't the future for frontier lawmen, nor for frontier towns.

Pickman looks at Hogan.

HOGAN
(continuing)
You bein' back in town will make many folks happy, but it will bring more violence, be certain of that. Things'll never be peaceable between Rattleborge and Quarterstone again, no they won't be.

Hogan shakes his head morosely.

HOGAN
(continuing)
I'd rather you left.

PICKMAN
I want to live near my wife and daughter and here's where they're buried. I'm not diggin' them up.

Hogan, seeing the futility in continued discussion, turns away from Pickman and walks towards the setting sun, the angled rays limning his plump body.

Hogan turns and looks at the sad, dusty man standing before his buried family.

HOGAN
Sheriff Dreighton had four brothers...and he wasn't even the biggest of 'em.

PICKMAN
If they want to kill me, I'll be sittin' on my porch.

HOGAN
You a gunfighter now?

PICKMAN
No, I don't intend to do any more killin'. I won't fight back as long as you bury me here when it's all over.

Hogan nods.

HOGAN
I can do that for you.

Pickman nods his thanks.

FADE TO BLACK:

FADE IN:

EXT. PICKMAN'S HOUSE - DUSK

Pickman, now with a thick beard and whiter hair, sits on his porch rocking back and forth in his chair. It is raining.

A dog begins to BARK in the distance. The rain collects in gray puddles on the newly paved street. Four ENORMOUS MEN walk up the road, towards Pickman's house. Each man holds a repeater rifle.

Pickman shuts his eyes and leans back in his rocking chair.

The rain continues to fall.

FADE TO BLACK:

THE END